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ARGOSY

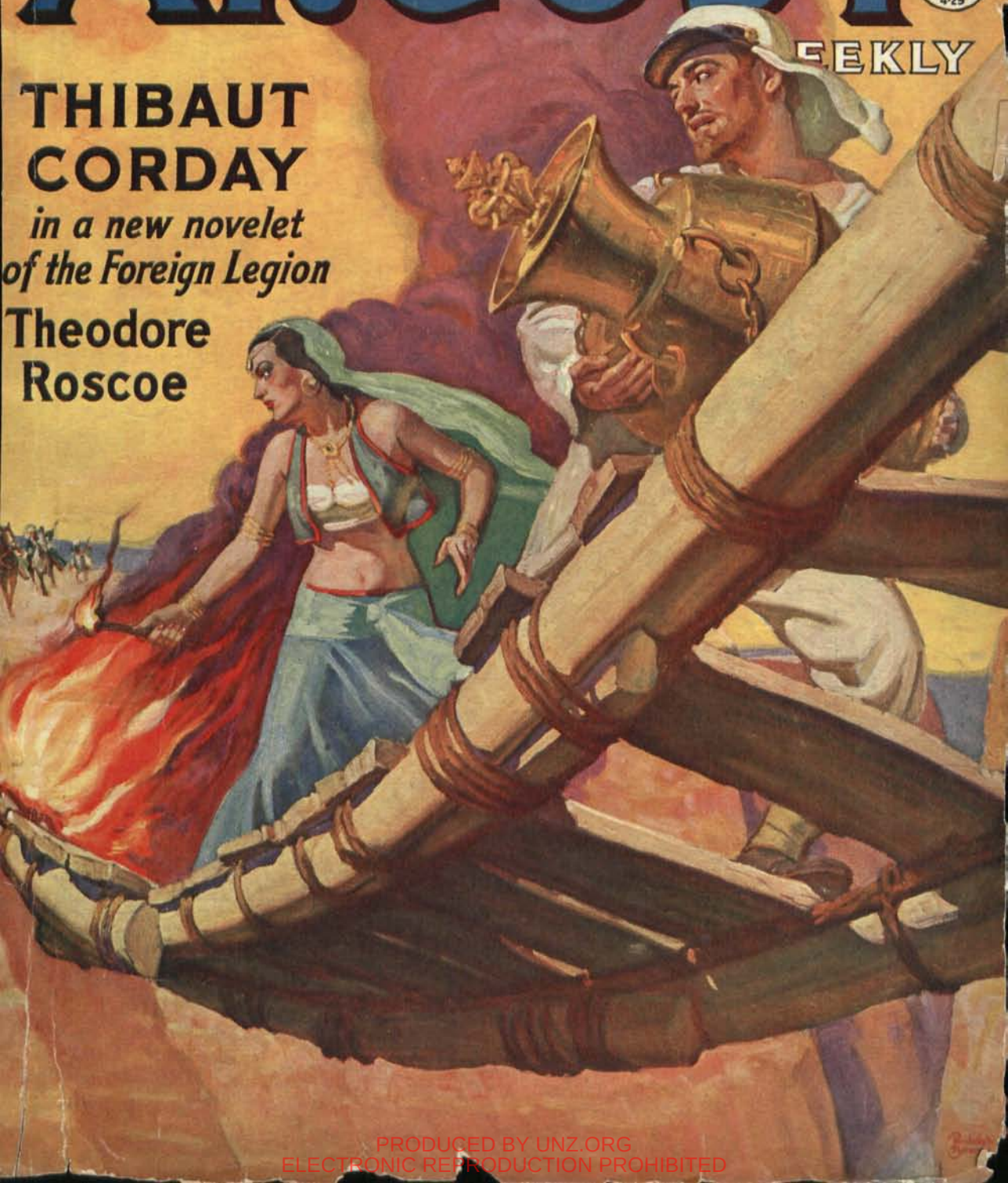
RED STAR MAGAZINE 4-29

EEKLY

THIBAUT CORDAY

in a new novelet of the Foreign Legion

Theodore Roscoe



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Volume 290 CONTENTS FOR APRIL 29, 1939 Number 1

The Wonderful Lamp of Thibaut Corday—*Complete Novelet*.....Theodore Roscoe 2
There in the Arab night glowed a light brighter than the sun—and there the Legionnaire met a genie to keep a green-eyed siren's promise

Minions of the Moon—*Second of three parts*..William Gray Beyer 25
It's startling for young Nevins to have Thor, god of Vikings, pat him on the head

Semper Paratus—*Short Story*.....Leslie T. White 46
A Latin expression meaning that practically anything can happen in the Coast Guard

Sheep Dog—*Short Story*.....Robert W. Cochran 58
Snow and ice and a kill-crazy badman make light of Sheriff Sanderson's 29-year record

Men of Daring—*True Story in Pictures*.....Stookie Allen 67
Norbert Casteret—Conqueror of Caverns

Riders of the Rifle Rock—*Third of five parts*.....Bennett Foster 68
Don't tote your star on a cowman's roundup, Sheriff Nester

Legends of the Legionaries—*Picture Feature*.....W. A. Windas 87
Lexicon of the Fighting Men

Angel Sharks—*Short Story*.....William Byron Mowery 88
They're the Gulf's slimiest smugglers—but a one-truck Jehu can bag his limit in a night

Make Hay in the Moonlight—*Short Story*...Robert Ormond Case 97
Dizzy Miss Millionbucks looks at a ranch and reaches for a Romeo

Sand in the Snow—*Conclusion*.....Norbert Davis 108
Only Jim Daniels can juggle both a defense and a prosecution, with one hand tied

Argonotes 127

Looking Ahead! 128

Cover by Rudolph Belarski

Illustrating The Wonderful Lamp of Thibaut Corday

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The Wonderful Lamp of Thibaut Corday

By THEODORE ROSCOE

Author of "Snake-Head," "Two Hours to Go," etc.

Listen while the bearded Scheherezade of the Legion spins the tale of the weirdest Arabian adventure that man has ever lived to tell. Here is the lamp that Aladdin might have owned, here is the genie of miraculous gifts, and here, for good measure, is the green-eyed woman with a song sweet enough to lure a latterday Sinbad to a thousand deaths

A Complete Novelet

I

I WAS reading the other day about the memory of man." Old Thibaut Corday tapped his forehead significantly. "How amazingly far back it goes. *Par exemple,* dragons. In this modern age we say, 'Pouf!' to stories about dragons; then some explorer digs up the bones of some huge animal sixty feet long. Some ancient ancestor saw this monster and called it a dragon, and the story came down through the centuries in the memory of man, so many centuries it finally was not believed. So with other wonderful things we disbelieve as myths. Like sea serpents, or the Little People."

"What about sea serpents and the Little People?"

Old Thibaut Corday scowled learnedly. "Why, there were such things. Have not our scientists reported huge marine snakes in the far Pacific? As for the Little People of Ireland, it has recently been discovered that the original inhabitants of Ireland were dwarfs. Three or four feet tall, they roamed the island long before the Celts arrived. Today these extinct dwarfs are remembered in legends, old wives' tales told in every Irish hut."

"Corday," I explained to the young

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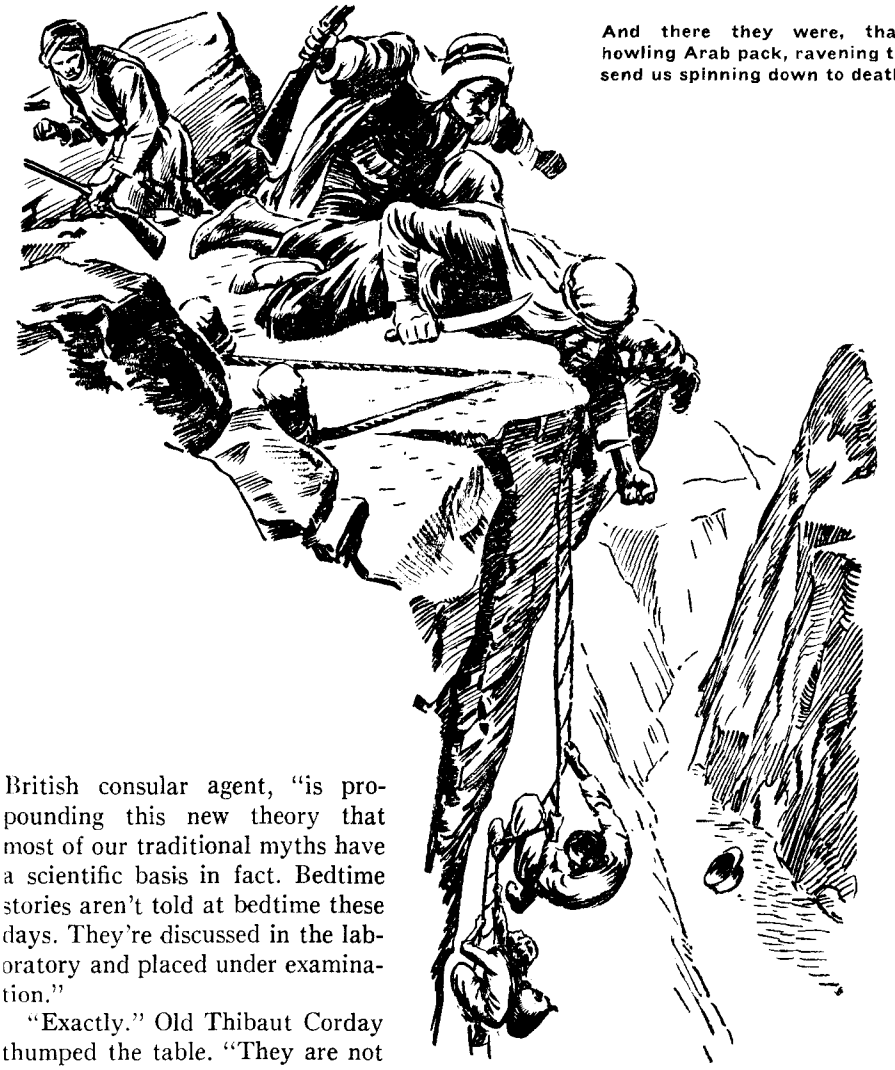

And there they were, that howling Arab pack, ravening to send us spinning down to death

British consular agent, "is propounding this new theory that most of our traditional myths have a scientific basis in fact. Bedtime stories aren't told at bedtime these days. They're discussed in the laboratory and placed under examination."

"Exactly." Old Thibaut Corday thumped the table. "They are not in our history books, these legends. But what child has not heard of giants, witches, wizards? A fairy story, the child is told. Yet now we are discovering that these legends are more than imaginary. These legends are recollections, so to speak. Of long-extinct marvels. Of one-time actualities."

The young British consular agent smiled. "Next thing you know, Corday, you'll be believing in Old Mother Hubbard and the Arabian Nights."

"About Grandmother Hubbard I do not know, but I do believe in the Arabian Nights!"

The old Frenchman's eyes blazed with conviction, and I had to suppress a chuckle, myself.

"You think they are so fantastic?" He glared. "You laugh at my credulity. But I think the Arabs have their memories, too. And what is an airplane, then, but a Magic Carpet? Who knows but what some sailor named Sinbad, many centuries ago, traveled about on some manner of flying kite? Today there are doors that open from the vibration of a voice. Who knows that the door to Ali Baba's cave

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did not open by some such vibration trick?

"Mind you"—Old Thibaut Corday raised a finger—"I do not say they were miracles without an explanation. I say they came down through the ages as *seeming* miracles. Such things happened and were remembered. Like the marvelous tale the woman with the emerald eyes told me."

"And did you live happy ever after?" The Englishman grinned.

"It was not so funny as you think," the old Frenchman snapped. "It was one of those Arabian Nights stories, and I thought it was only a nursery tale. Then I found out differently, and I was lucky to live afterwards at all. What? Have I never told you about the genie who came at my summons? The genie who gave me a wish, and the wish came true?"

Round-eyed, the young British consular agent stared. At the old Legion veteran across the table, then at the wine bottle at Corday's elbow. "Genie? Came at your summons? Gave you a wish—?"

"—that came true!" Old Thibaut Corday nodded. "I was in Arabia, and I wished I was out of there, and that curst genie waved his hand— *Sacré!* the next thing I knew I was on British soil. It was exactly as the woman with the emerald eyes had promised, exactly as she had told it in her story from the Arabian Nights. If you think I am drunk, I can prove to you I am not. It has to do with this business of the truth behind nursery tales, and I can prove it with the story of the green-eyed woman and the genie. A bottle of Dubonnet I can do it to your satisfaction."

The young Englishman said it was a wager because it would take a lot of satisfying to convince him there was such a thing as a genie. In the twilight under the café awning the old Frenchman's eyes glinted fiercely. Lubricating his throat with the last of his wine, he leaned forward in his chair, and sprinted off from a gun-shot oath to win the Dubonnet. . . .

MORBLEU! (Old Thibaut Corday was off) it started innocently enough with a fight aboard a troopship steaming down the Red Sea for French Somaliland, miles south of the Suez Canal. The World War was two years over, but the Legion must go down and fight Somali bandits. The foreign Legion is always fighting. On the troopship there was nothing to do, so the Legionnaires fought among themselves.

I acquired the hate of a Spanish scoundrel named Balderos, an evil bullfighter who had taken to jabbing his dagger into people instead of bulls. He had a nose as sharp as a blade, and I dulled it for him one night when he was bragging too much. The weasel swore he would get even. It was a good place to do it in, too. That Red Sea is a moat to keep civilization out of Arabia, and from the look of the coast there it has done a good job. Balderos decided it would make a nice shore for my body to rot on. A treacherous rascal.

I was ordered up on deck to stand a midnight watch, and the villain sprang at me from behind a ventilator. Quick and silent he sprang; in the gleams from a distant port hole I had only a glimpse of his face. *Mon Dieu!* he meant to murder me—just in time I dodged the knife. I flung up my arm to fend the blow; the blade only pared a peel from my Adam's apple; but the collision flung me overboard, knocked me over the rail like a sack of beef.

When I cleared my eyes the ship was waddling off into darkness; I was alone in the black, warm brine of the sea. My first yells were only gargles, and by the time I pumped my lungs free of salt water the transport was gone. I had an idea the Spaniard would not ask the captain to drop a lifeboat. Somaliland was as far as Mars; the nearest coast was Arabia, and it looked as if I had to swim for it.

I swam and swam. Somehow I kicked off my shoes and juggled out of my tunic; and I struck off for what I hoped was the coast, and kept swimming. *Bleu!* that Red Sea was black. I could see nothing.

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After a few hours I began to tire. If that Red Sea was not so salty and buoyant, I would today be rubbing elbow-bones with the charioteers who tried to follow Moses.

But along about morning I hit a strip of beach, and the sun was coming up as I hauled myself up on the salt-crusted rocks to dry. That beach was hardly the place to recuperate, and I knew it the minute I looked around.

Inland I could see nothing but sand-banks rank with thorny desert-brush; the beach was no more than a clutter of heat-cracked rocks. Under the blazing sun I began to fry like a herring. "*Ma mère!*" I groaned. "In five minutes I will die of thirst, and there is no drinking water within a million miles. This is surely the coast of hell."

THEN I saw the woman. I was lacing on the boots which I had hung around my neck, and when I looked up—pouf!—she was there. Not fifteen feet away, she was lying atop a big yellow rock, watching me, intent. I do not say it was magic, though so it seemed at the time. I suppose my brine-stung eyes had not noticed her at first. She was posed so superbly motionless that her bronze figure melted into the scenery the way an umber lioness melts into African veldt.

Oui, I thought her a piece of bronze statuary that some sculptor had put up on top of that rock. Reclining on one elbow, head uplifted, langorous, she watched me. Picture the face of Mona Lisa on a figure of burnished curves clad in no more than a string. But it was her eyes that convinced me she was not real. Never had I been fixed by a stare of such vivid green.

"Emeralds!" I exclaimed. "Now I know I am in Hades."

I got up and started toward her but I did not get far. Three steps through the sunrise, and I fell on my face. That firebrand sun hit me over the head, or it may be the woman's gaze felled me; at any rate I dropped unconscious, and I came to, groaning for water.

I stopped groaning when I discovered myself in the green-eyed woman's arms. She had pulled me into a shady recess behind the big yellow rock, and she was soothing my forehead with a hand as cool as mint. When she saw I was awake, she pressed a little stone jug to my lips and gave me a drink of fig wine.

"Do you feel better now, *Ferangi?*" she murmured. "You were almost drowned, and you were dying of thirst. Do you feel better now?"

"Much better," I gasped. Ah, I could have swooned there drinking that matchless nectar with that woman stroking my forehead. I closed my eyes again, and she gave me another drink. Her fingers were like brook-ripples and the drink was wonderful.

"And now you eat."

From a crevice she took a brown cloak and unwrapped a piece of bread. There were dates in the bread, and I lay back on the sand, munching it and staring at the woman and thinking of Omar Khayyam. The woman reclined beside me, and watched with emerald eyes.

"I am glad the Spaniard threw me overboard," I told her finally. "Where am I? It is not bad here. How long have I been dead?"

"But you are not dead," she gave me with a soft bronze smile. "You had swallowed much salt water, but you are far too strong to die. This," and she pointed down the coast, "is that part of Arabia known as Asir. You were swimming out there in the Red Sea when I saw you just before dawn. I ran to this end of the beach where I saw you were going to land, but I dared not aid you until I saw you were an honest man. Honesty I read in your face while your mind was asleep just now. But do not talk, *Ferangi,* you are tired." She laid cool fingers on my eyelids. "Rest, now. Rest—"

I rested. With those mint-tipped fingers on my eyelids I felt as drowsy as if I were in a hamock under a tree. The woman was not any ordinary Arab, I was certain. To begin with, she had spoken

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in English—soft-throated English with an Arabic accent—and there was an alloy of gold in her hair and complexion, and she was twice too beautiful to be the daughter of some Bedouin camel-thumper. Part Egyptian or Circassian or something like that, she would have been a beauty in any language, and she was a big surprise on that burning, barren coast.

But I kept napping off instead of asking questions, and each time I woke she would give me more wine and date bread.

Eh bien, the day passed so, and I was sorry to wake up at last in late afternoon. Blue shadows were pooling among the rocks and the woman sat beside me, wrapped in her cloak, portioning out the last of the bread. Also she had found my cigarettes in my belt and laid them out to dry. Matches, too. When I finished my rations and leaned back, smoking, I decided I had met the one perfect woman in the world.

"You saved my life," I told her. "I would have died had you not come to my aid. Is there any way I can repay you?"

Her green eyes regarded me thoughtfully when I said that. Regarding me, they gave me that feeling I had as a child when I would lean over the stone rim and look down into the depths of my father's well.

"You would like to repay me, *Sidi?* You would really like to do something for me in return?"

"I would, indeed," I assured her, feeling the pull of those bottomless green depths. "I am only a castaway, a soldier of the Legion; but for you I would do anything. Anything at all."

"How would you like to help me recover a fortune?" she asked.

So casually she asked it that I was shocked bolt upright, *messieurs.* I stared at her lips to make sure I had heard it. "A fortune—?"

"A great fortune," she nodded, "one of the greatest in the world. Diamonds are nothing beside it. Rubies, pearls—it is worth them all. Just to hold it in your hand for one night would make you a millionaire forever, *Sidi.* How would you like to help me recover it?"

"Where is it?" I cried. "Where can such a treasure be found?"

She looked at me for a long time as if trying to make up her mind, and then her voice came low above the whisper of the Red Sea waves that were sporting in the twilight on the sand.

"In a lamp."

II

THAT is how I met the woman with the emerald eyes; how she came to tell me the story of the wonderful lamp. She told it to me there on that twilight Red Sea beach a million miles from Nowhere, and I was not as prepared to hear that marvelous story as you have been.

She began by drawing a picture of the lamp in the sand, the sort of big Arab lamp that you see in the native bazaars, shaped like a ten-gallon pitcher, but small at the neck like a jug, with a wick in the spout. She was a good artist, too. But her words were better. She moulded that lamp with words that gave it curves like a woman's hip. She gilded it and filled it with the oil of her voice. Lit it with the blaze from her eyes. Its flame, she said, was pure brightness, a handful of incandescence from the sun. I almost forgot the point behind her story in the desire she created in me to see so splendid a thing.

"And it doesn't smoke?" I asked. "You never have to trim the wick?"

"It does not smoke and you never have to trim the wick. Think of it, *Sidi.* The shape! Made of gold! A flame like the sun in darkness! From the shop of the world's greatest lamp-maker! Would you not like to own such a lamp?"

"I certainly would!" said I, a Legionnaire who had never owned a lamp or a window to throw one out of—*non,* nor ever wanted to till then. That woman made me feel as if I had missed the greatest treat of my life, and I voiced my wonder at the spendthrift plutocrat

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who would hide a treasure in such a magnificent vessel.

"But the lamp, itself, is the treasure!" the woman cried. "It is priceless, *Sidi.* Beyond the reach of any pocketbook! Men have died for a chance to see it; kings have sold their thrones to own it for an hour. Rich and poor have cut one another's throats, traded their souls to Shaitan in attempts to get that lamp in their possession. It is ten thousand years old—twice ten thousand!—and from the day it was made, men have cut the East in bloody strips trying to get their hands on it. Listen, *Sidi—*"

I listened, all right. That lamp had a history as well as a pedigree; and as the green-eyed woman recited it to me, I listened as a schoolboy listens to the exploits of Napoleon.

What a saga that was. It seemed that lamp had been made in the workshops of Araby before Bagdad was built. The pyramids over in Egypt were still on blueprints; the East was a pretty dark place up until that lamp was put on the market.

That lamp brightened things up a bit. It was just as much of a novelty as your grandfather's Mazda bulb, and the Arabs, who had known only stars and torches, sat around and blinked at the thing in wonder. The lampsmith gave it to the king as a birthday gift; but the first thing the king knew, he was murdered in his bed by some neighboring *ameer* who wanted to brighten up his own dark evenings.

From then on, it was a dogfight to see who could keep it. Shieks stole it from sultans, and khedives stole it from shieks. Thieves made off with it; princes killed their brothers to inherit it; moguls hanged their children to make them tell where it was.

For century after century the Arab world was in a turmoil over that lamp. Marauders carried it to Persia, and an army went from Mecca to fetch it back. It was owned by Ahmed the Mighty, by Suliman the Conqueror. Zoroaster wrote the great *Zend-Avesta* by its light, and Mohammed the Prophet tore half the hairs from his beard because it disappeared during his lifetime and his generals could not find out where.

From Turkey to Palestine, it went. From palaces to pawnshops. When it was lost, the East was perfumed by the corpses of adventurers who had lost their lives hunting it. Jenghiz Khan charged all the way from Tartary seeking the lamp; Tamerlane hid it in India; it was owned by Abdul the Great.

BUT the story needs that barren beach, the desert stretching east, the Red Sea stretching west, twilight spinning gray cobwebs among the rocks, the silence of Arabia around. It needs that bronze-skinned beauty with the emerald eyes. She chanted me that history in a mixture of quaint, Arabic-accented English that I could not hope to copy; some of her phrases were a little hard for me, a Frenchman, to understand.

But I could understand the rise and fall of her tones. Her eyes. Her gestures. Her voice struck chords as haunting as a balalaika. In her eyes I could see the battles and murders, all those thieves, shieks and sultans she was talking about. I figured she was exaggerating—what woman does not?—and I counted on—how do you call it?—poetic license. Nonetheless, I comprehended what she meant to convey.

This lamp was worth more than just gold. It was a priceless relic, a most rare antique—like the belt of Buddha, or Cleopatra's bedroom slippers.

"It is something more than that!" she cried when I spoke out. "Does it mean anything to you, *Sidi,*"—she threw wide her arms—"when I tell you this lamp once belonged to the great prince, Allah Deen?"

"Allah Deen," I pronounced the name after her. "No, I have never heard of this prince before."

"But he was one of the greatest of Arabian princes," she cried. "Known all over the world! Almost as famous in Islam as the Prophet!"

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"I am not so well educated in Arabian history," I apologized. "But I understand. The lamp is a priceless relic, having belonged to so great a historical character."

"More than that! More than that!" In exasperation at my ignorance, the woman burst into a barrage of excited Arabic. Then even her native tongue seemed incapable of evaluating this curio, for at the point where she tried to price it, her vocabulary seemed to wear into holes and tatters. "Only you would not believe what I try to tell you." She shook her head at my incomprehension. "The English words —I cannot find them to tell it in. You must rob the lamp to find out what it is worth. Do you understand? You must *rob* the lamp!"

"I see." In truth, it startled me. "You want me to steal it."

"Steal! Yes! That is it!" She leaned at me, breathlessly. "Once we have it in our possession the world is ours! Power! Riches! Travel! It is a treasure that can bring you anything you wish!"

"But who owns it now?" I panted. Her expression made my pulses pound, but I still had a spark of conscience. Stealing a candle is one thing, perhaps, but one's conscience is apt to prick at the thought of snaffling a lamp worth millions.

She snuffed that out of me, though. She dropped her voice to an alto that made prickles tiptoe down my spine as I realized she was betraying a secret every robber in Arabia would have butchered his mother to hear.

"It is in a den of thieves," she said. "A stronghold of rascals, rogues, marauders. Chief of the stronghold is the wicked Caïd El Azrek, whose name strikes terror to all who hear it along this coast. For years, undiscovered, he has held the lamp secure in this walled fortress of assassins. It was thought to be in Bagdad, but El Azrek murdered the Caliph who owned it, and fled with it here for safe keeping."

"And why do you tell me this?" I asked.

Serpolette! her face went hard. At my question it went from bronze to iron. "Because I hate El Azrek!" she spat. "You do not know how I hate him! I was his wife in Bagdad, favorite of his harem—until he seized the lamp. The fortune went to his head, *Ferangi!*

"He left me for riches; fled with his treasure to this desert stronghold where he thought to hide it in greater security. For ten years I have been hunting this wretch who prizes riches more than my love. Only yesterday I found his hideout; I knew it by the lamplight, by Allah! The walls are high and well guarded, but there is a back door, and I saw the room where the Caïd sleeps with the treasure he chose in my stead." Her voice dropped a shivery octave. "It would kill him if the lamp were stolen. It would break his evil heart!"

"How do you propose to steal it?" I stammered.

Softening her features, she regarded me gently with her deep, green eyes. "I have made a plan which I can tell you when we get there. I could not carry the gold lamp alone; but where one could never enter, two can slip through. There is danger, but you are brave. There is risk, but much to gain. Remember! Only to rob this lamp and it will bring you any luxury in the world!"

For that green-eyed look of hers, I felt willing to risk anything. "How far is this bandit stronghold?" I was on my feet.

She gripped my arm and pointed at the sand hills where the dusk was gathering up the last pink patches of sunset light. "We can be there by midnight if we start at once."

Her eyes met mine, and we started at once.

III

PERHAPS you wonder how I could follow a strange woman into unknown desert like that, and sometimes I wonder myself. Was it the sea water I had swallowed? Fig wine and the woman's eyes? The saga she had sung about that lamp? I think it was all those together; and I had nothing to lose, nowhere to

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go, and I owed the lady something for her rescue act.

At any rate, I had caught the treasure-fever, and caught it bad! Treasure-fever? Well, the sanest citizen is a fortune hunter at heart—and Foreign Legionnaires are not quite the sanest citizens. Ha! It seemed to me that night as if Fate had washed me up at the feet of Lady Luck herself. I followed her, itching, like Cortez on his way to Eldorado.

That desert had Eldorado atmosphere, too. We tramped southeast across the sandhills, and the night came down in black silk curtains that transformed that Arabian wilderness into a patch of real estate from a dream.

The hills were black crêpe crested with splashes of lemon. The sky was a purple velvet canopy pinned back by a yellow crescent moon with a star at its tip, like the trademark on a package of Turkish cigarettes. Warm air whispered in the thorn clumps, and there was a tang in the darkness that reminded me of the spice-cake my mother used to make. It seemed like just the country where a jealousy-maddened woman would set out to steal from her husband a relic worth a few million dollars.

The woman walked fast, striding through the brush with the sure-footed swiftness of one who knew her ground and purpose. I could discern no trail, but I think her eyes could see in the dark.

When we topped a moony rise I would glimpse her face, and her features were cast-iron when she thought I wasn't looking. Her eyes gleamed green on some fixed point in the night ahead, a gleam that telegraphed shivers down my neck.

"*Dieu!*" I thought to myself. "That El Azrek was a lumphead to jilt this lady for any lamp. I would suffer a lifetime with Mother-in-Law Poverty before I ditched a wife with such eyes!"

Myself, I would not have picked the fort of an Arab bandit as a place to attempt grand larceny. But every time I had doubts, the woman would sense them and demolish them with her magic words.

"Remember, it is the lamp that belonged to the great Prince Allah Deen. Any shiek in Arabia would pay a fortune for the wick, alone, of this lamp!"

Well, it took little urging to hustle me over those sand hills. I knew a little about curios, understand. In Algeria and Tonkin I had seen high prices on ancient knick-knacks; in Syria there had been some antique-merchants digging near our Legion outpost, and an old image without a head—a piece of baked mud, merely—had been shipped to America with a price-tag of staggering extravagance. That hunk of mud was nowhere near as old as the woman said this lamp was. And the lamp was solid gold!

I saw the bankers and museum-collectors of London, New York and Paris opening their purses to buy that relic. No more drill and foot-slog in the lousy Legion. I'd buy Renaults and two wine cellars and a box of cigars, and I'd bribe the War Department to send that Spaniard Balderos to the terrible Battalion d'Afrique!

For five hours we hurried across those dreamy sandhills, and at the end of that time I was lounging on divans in air-castles, richer than Croesus.

We were many miles from the coast when the woman finally halted in the lee of a high purple ridge directly under the cigarette-package moon. "We are almost there," she breathed. "El Azrek's stronghold lies in a valley the other side of this ridge. Take care to keep in shadow. The bandits who guard the treasure-house of the lamp have eyes like jackals."

IT WAS all I could do to keep from bolting up over the hill to see the place. As the woman ascended ahead of me, my hands itched, my tongue poked out. The night was like an ambush up ahead, but I was too busy mentally fingering a million dollars to worry about the hazards of attainment.

At the ridge-top the woman clutched me down into the shadow of a thorn bush. "There it is!" she panted. "Look! The lamp! Down there—!"

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Believe me, I was looking. How I looked! It was a great scene the woman showed me from that high place, the greater because in the back of my French mind I had been skeptical of seeing anything at all. What I saw then gave the knockout punch to my skepticism. Arabia, *messieurs!* One vast sweeping stretch of silent sandhills, etched in moon-yellow and stripes of black night, a landscape like a tiger's pelt spread out to the edges of the world. And on the sands below our high place, a black-walled, sullen fortress with a light in its lofty watchtower glowing as one fierce, livid eye.

It was a tiger asleep with one eye open. . . .

The fortress resembled a bunch of piled-up dungeons, black as coal, but that light in the upper tower was just about the brightest glare I had ever seen. What is it from Shakespeare— How far that little candle throws its beams? Huh! The flare in that turret was about two million kilowatts beyond Shakespeare. It was all of a mile distant, but even at that distance it made me blink. It was as if that tower room was filled with a white-green fire. I thought I had never beheld such a radiance.

The green-eyed woman gripped my arm. "I told you it was the brightest lamp in the world. You would have seen it from the coast had not this high ridge come between. Ah, that husband of mine! That hyena, El Azrek! Back here with his treasure he thought to be safe, for no caravans cross that waste you see out there, and the Arabs of the coast, who quail at his name, dare not cross the ridge at night, and have not seen the lamp!"

"But blessed Sébastopol!" I gulped. The glare in that tower was holding my visionary muscles hypnotized, but I was not too blinded to catch the white-hooded figures of Arabs moving sentrylike along the battlements beneath. "The place is guarded like a citadel. It would take three regiments of Legionnaires to storm those walls. Why, stealing that light would be like trying to take the torch from the Statue of Liberty."

My companion murmured: "Hear me. In a little while that light will go out. *Mektoob!* It is written that he who would keep the precious lamp must light it for an hour every midnight. My pious husband is keeping the tradition, but by Allah! he shall not keep the lamp. Soon he will blow out the flame and carry it down to his chamber where he thinks it is safe for the night. That wolf's den will be in pitch darkness; then we strike!"

"But those brigands guarding the wall!"

"As I told you," she pointed, "last night when I crept around the place I discovered a back door. I saw El Azrek at a window beyond with his cherished lamp. *Ins'allah!* I would have climbed the wall to claw out his faithless beard, but to steal the treasure-lamp would be six times the revenge, so I retired and walked all night by the sea, thinking."

Her eyes refracted gleams from that mile-off incandescence, and I was glad the lady hadn't walked the beach all night cooking up something against me. "Observe." She pressed my knee. "That back door opens into a little palm garden. Beyond is an archway, a flight of stairs. The stairs lead to the Caïd's bed chamber, but the scoundrel sleeps in an alcove and the room many be entered unseen. So much I learned from the guard who stands nearest that rear entry—a beardless boy! I sang to him a soft love song, and boys can be made to talk! One has but to enter the fortress; then—? Easy!"

"Easy!" I gasped. "How do you open that door to begin with?"

"Leave that to me," was her answer. "The boy expects me tonight; I will lure him a distance away. Follow me to within a stone's throw of the walls; I will open the door; then I will go to a corner of the wall and call off the boy. That will be your chance. The lamp—such a treasure as you never dreamed—but waits your hand for the taking, *Ferangi!*"

Aunt of the Devil! just as the woman said that, that light went out as she had promised. And I think my reason was extinguished with it.

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Fantastic as that lamp-story sounded, that stronghold in the middle of Nowhere with that light in its tower confirmed it. That was no common Arab stronghold! I could smell bandits in that place the way you can whiff a den of rattlesnakes, yet your ordinary bandit chief doesn't set off an acetylene torch at the top of his citadel. And when that light blacked out, Belief hit me over the head and raised one big bump of credulity.

THE woman started down from the ridge, and I went after her. The fortress, after that glim was doused, was black. *Lamp* black! The walls reared up like a masonry of ink and silence, and as we reached desert-level they loomed like a silhouetted animal, couchant but ready to pounce. It had shut its bright eye, but it was a wary sleeper, you could tell. I felt as if I were treading on its fur, and I moved across the sands very softly, you may believe.

Not as softly as that bronze lady, though. The sand was waved up in low dunes—it was the shadows between the dunes which gave the desert that striping effect—and the woman crept over the moon-washed crests with a protective coloration that was wonderful. She could flatten and melt on the sand as a chameleon melts itself on a wall; and watching her, I learned how it was that Arabs could surprise a Legion outpost by charging as if from mid-air.

In the black stripes between she could disappear completely! Twice I thought she was a dozen yards ahead, and bumped into her in a dark spot where she was waiting, invisible.

"Do not do that!" I begged.

"Hush!" She touched my lips. "The walls of that place have ears. All would be lost if those guards heard us approaching."

We had a mile of sand to cross before we reached that sleeping stronghold, and before we had covered half the distance I wanted to sit down and howl. At least, my nerves did. The rest of me wanted to rush that treasure-house and get it over with.

Alors, we got there soon enough. My nervous system was blowing out a fuse when the woman halted in a thorn clump and turned to give me final instructions. Close up, that fortress looked bigger than the Bastille. Walls thirty feet high enclosed a massive, dark-windowed keep, a veritable Rhineland castle save for the crenellated ramparts and square-topped Arab tower. I could make out a little door facing us that might have been imported from the Tower of London. Also I could make out Arab turbans and a glint of rifle barrels moving up and down the palisades above, and my teeth, which had more sense than I did, began to chatter.

"Wait here." The woman squeezed my hand. "It will take me but a moment to open that door; then I will run to that corner of the wall to draw the attention of the guard. I will sing to him a love song that will blind him with desire. Enter when I drop the wine jug. That is your signal."

Was there ever such a campaign-plan to enter such a fortress? Contemplating that stronghold, my treasure-fever chilled down a degree, and I turned to ask the woman if she couldn't blind that guardsman with something a little more interesting than a song. Holy Saint Anselm! She was gone! In the shadows at my elbow she had vanished. I didn't want to be left by myself just then. I grabbed around in the thorn scrub, but she wasn't there.

Do you know where she was when I saw her next? She was halfway between that clump where I was frozen and that fortress door. And then she was at the door—as quick as that! I tell you, that woman was like a draught of air, all moonlight and shadow and dust. At that door she was as hard to see as a phantom's silhouette.

I would give much to know how she opened that door in the wall. I believe she said, "Open Sesame!" It looked like that kind of a door. Anyway, it was not ten seconds before she crept to a corner

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of that battlement; and the door was unlocked when I got there.

The green-eyed woman sang and a young Arab looked over the rampart above her; and when she dropped her little jug, I raced to that door and darted in. You believe? Too generous, *messieurs*. Had you known that woman you would believe me capable of such folly with more conviction. I do not know what she sang to that guard —but I know how she had sung that lamp-yarn to me, and she had drugged me with a desire that made me rush in where angels would fear to tread.

I must have been mad when I ran through that unlocked portal into that fortress—! Think of the chances I took! The woman and her guard were not a hundred feet away, and the whole place crawled with watchmen like a mangy dog with fleas.

I did not stop in the high-walled garden, either. It was a dusty courtyard, Arab style, where a couple of date palms drooped glumly over a well. I crossed this patio to an onion-peaked archway that gave view to dark steps mounting into the Bastille, and I went up those sinister steps as a man would climb a stair up into a catacomb.

Gumshoe I went. With thudding heart and baited breath. Into a black hush at the summit that was like a funeral. Conceive me creeping into that fortress while that woman serenaded the watchman outside! Picture me shaky-legged in a dark upper corridor, peering, sweating, almost suffocating in the bandit-musk. Imagine, then, a near doorway, an inner chamber blue with moonlight, the sound of someone snoring. Whew! I took one peek into that moon-lit room; turned to run. Then—? Then I saw the lamp!

IV

WHAT could I say of that lamp? At that moment I could not talk. Nor can I now, for when I try to tell of it as I saw it, my vocabulary wears out and goes to pieces. So high—so wide—shaped like a big water-pitcher, but narrowed at the neck like a jug with spout and wick—that sounds like a lamp you'd see in any Arab shop in the Kasbab. Ten-gallon capacity sounds like a milk can. It was there in a corner?— So is your old umbrella stand. I am reduced to the one word, "Gold!" Which is feeble description for a thing which gleamed like butter in the shadows, big and yellow as the prize at Rainbow's End.

Now I was on that bonanza in one bound. I had it on my shoulder and out of that snoring room in a trice. As far as the stairs it was all according to schedule, but at that point Providence set out to teach me a lesson. As I started down those steps there was a screech at the bottom that shattered the silence like a factory whistle.

"Waaaah!"

I thought it was an elephant charging in from the courtyard, but it was only a seven-foot Negro waving a scimitar. That giant must have seen me as I whisked the golden lamp past a window, and he had come bounding from his post to find out what it was about. When he saw me on those stairs, he trumpeted another blast and started up to me. The six Prussian guardsmen who once caught me on a chateau staircase at Rheims were not quite as ugly as that customer. I took on those six Prussians—I would do it again—but that Negro looked like a Senegalese army coming up the stairs, and I wheeled in immediate retreat.

Too late! That screech had roused the house. Snores in El Azrek's bedroom had turned to howls. Men were bursting from doors down the corridor. That fortress was roaring like a four-alarm fire. Up the steps came that black giant while all the fiends of Gehenna were rushing me from the corridor; I had to pick the Negro and let fly.

Wham! With the only weapon I had, *messieurs*. That sacred lamp! With all my might I flung it; dived down after it as it cleared a path. *Whankety-whang-whang-whang!* It made a racket, I can tell you. Bouncing like a beer keg, it took that

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black man across the shins and sent him tumbling. I jumped him, and we bounced down together—myself, the black giant and the lamp. Wow! that fortress came into action with the roar of an exploding cannon foundry on Sunday. As I rolled out into the courtyard with lamp and giant, I saw Arabs running and shooting from all directions.

I slugged that huge gorilla-man with every fist I had. He laughed when I hit him; jumped up and grinned like a slice of watermelon. He slashed out with his scimitar and would have cut me in half if he hadn't tripped over the lamp and gone floundering headlong into the well.

Water shot up like a fountain as Negro and scimitar disappeared, but they were instantly replaced by a dozen Arabs who jumped me through a dust-cloud. I had a scrap on my hands then, my friends. The worst kind of a scrap! Like demons they were on me.

I snatched up the spinning lamp and flailed like a maniac at those leaping devils. Knives flashed by me. Guns fired. Sheeted bodies, bearded faces boiled around me in the dust-swirl. I dented a few heads with that crushing antique, but it was far too heavy for in-fighting.

Back and across that court I fought, like a dog in the middle of a wolf pack, while more and more Arabs leaped down from the walls. Their number hampered gunfire, but they would have knifed me to ribbons under a pile-up, if the woman hadn't rushed in to my aid.

Like a Goddess of Fury she charged into that pack, cracking heads with her stone wine-jug, spitting and biting like a wolverine. I think the surprise scattered those Arabs as much as anything. Not expecting her, they jumped back to their wall stations to see if there were any more coming.

"The lamp!" she screamed, arriving at my side. "I knew you could get it, *Sidi!* Run now! Run!"

I needed no second invitation. Lamp aloft, with the green-eyed woman acting as rear guard, I streaked out. All hell was loose in that bandit-hive behind me—a tumult of whistles, yowls, shooting, torch-flares and trumpet blasts. Somewhere a drum was booming and in the tower they were pounding a brass gong, but I did not wait to see the fun.

The woman got me out of that little door. I believe she could have gotten me out of anything. Outside she took the lead, screaming at me to follow, and I chased after her while a bullet-blizzard chased after me. I was not surprised to see the young Arab guard tied hand and foot at the corner of the fortress wall.

"This way! This way!" she called. "Keep in the shadow!" She had reached one of those valleys between the dunes where the wall snipers couldn't see us, and she raced down the furrow invisible as a rabbit in an underground hole.

She knew the Arabs would not chase out of their fortress after us on foot—your Arab never walks when he can ride—and by delaying to saddle up, those devils gave us the chance she wanted.

"Three miles south there is a bridge," she cried. "Over a canyon of boiling mud. If we can beat their horses to the bridge I can stop them!"

"How can we beat their horses to the bridge?" I gasped.

"They will think us headed for the coast where the brush is thicker," the woman cried. "They will ride that way to head us off. By the time they find our tracks we will have ten minutes' start."

SURE enough, a moment later I heard hoofbeats thunder out of the fortress and fade in the direction of the coast, and I ran for my life. Ten minutes is not much start on a batch of Arab horsemen. I ran like Nurmi, shifting my burden from right to left shoulder to keep it from raising a blister.

"Courage, *mes braves!*" I addressed my legs. "Get me away with this prize and you have put an end to marching with haversacks forever. By its heft this gold lamp should purchase a chair on the stock exchange at least!"

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Ten minutes later, as the woman had predicted, the night was full of echoing hoofbeats. I had to concentrate on the business of running. That can be a tiresome business, too. The green-eyed woman ran like a fluid streak, and I had to strain to keep up with her.

Those hoofbeats behind us thundered closer and closer. "Faster!" the woman screamed. "We are almost at the canyon!" She raced up and over a dune patched with thorn scrub, and then I saw something that dead-stopped me.

That vast cleft in the desert with the boiling mud river at its bottom—that is something you will have to take my word for. The devil's cauldrons of the Yellowstone and the fire bogs of Tannu Tuva are on your maps, but that chasm I saw in Arabia is not, and neither is that part of Arabia. I suppose that gulch is one of the undiscovered wonders of the world; let me tell you, I was not too happy about discovering it.

My boots were palsied on its edge. Fifty feet across the top, it dropped a thousand, sheer-walled—a terrific zigzag abyss that looked as if the tropic heat had cracked the globe and left a fissure so deep it drained the earth's core.

I could see the drainage far at the bottom—a winding, writhing river of brown, bubbling, spitting; a snake of boiling slime that crawled down that earth-bowel, jetting up vapors and spattering its walls with mire. I hollered when I looked down into that sewer of hell, and I hollered again when I saw the bridge that spanned that abyss.

That was no cantilever trestle!

It was just a flimsy rigging of timber and bamboo duckboards some fool had thrown across—time had rotted the underpinnings and there weren't any handrails, and it hung above there like a cobweb terrified of the gust of wind that will knock it down. A spider wouldn't have dared to cross on it, and I froze as the woman screamed at me to start.

"Better fall than be caught by my husband." She shoved me. "He would torture you for a year if he caught you alive with the lamp!" Do you know what she did? She snatched the relic from my arms; pulled a stopper near the wick-spout, and poured out a stream of oil. "Run first!" she cried. "Go on! I will set the bridge afire as I follow!"

I told you that lady was cool.

Fierce yells burst out in the night; over the dune charged El Azrek's riders led by what looked like the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse; the woman gave me a push that sent me reeling out on that bridge, and, pouring oil, she labored after me.

The trestle gave a sickening sag, and I felt the bones melt in my knees as I looked down. My boots went so fast they did not seem to touch those lurching duckboards. After me toiled the woman, spilling oil from that ponderous lamp, and striking and dropping matches—those matches she had salvaged from my pockets on the beach—with the other. Bent almost double—her face sweat-streaked . . .

Leaping from their horses, our pursuers howled when they saw her arson—that web of timbers caught fire like straw, and a trail of flame jumped up at the woman's heels. Those Arabs just stood fumbling their knives and guns. I reached the other side of the abyss two jumps ahead of that woman; the bridge was an arc of flame behind her—and if you can picture that, try this!

Leaping to safety, the woman heaved the lamp back into my sweating hands, pushed me into a brush-clump and turned to give our pursuers a laugh that trilled into a cry of fear. "Name of Allah! Keep running! Here they come!"

Those weren't Arabs, they were daredevils! Was that fiery bridge going to stop them? *Non!* Out on that trestle of fire they were creeping single file, beating at the flames with their cloaks, swaying and balancing in the sparks and blazelight and smoke like demons.

I ran when I saw it, *messieurs!* Praying for the bridge to crash, I shouldered the lamp and ran after the woman at express

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speed, but the bridge delayed crashing just long enough for the Arabs to get across, and again the hue and cry was after us in the night. I asked my legs to move me, then. I was certain, now, I was carrying off a gold mine in that lamp.

AH, BUT I was soon to learn how much a gold mine can weigh! I was soon to learn that getting a fortune is one thing, enjoying it another! In the race I ran with that lamp across that desert in Arabia I learned a number of things, my friends.

We ran into a dawn where the sun came up like Saint Anthony's fire, and I learned about heat. We ran into a noon where the fig wine was gone from the woman's little jug, and I learned about thirst. We ran on into an afternoon where I learned about foot-blisters, heart-fatigue, lung-strain. All day we fled across the burning dunes with that lamp, and all day those Arab hounds pursued us.

We ran blindly, wearily, heavily and more heavily burdened. They ran steadily, tirelessly, like machinery. Looking back I could see them a quarter-mile behind, rifles and knife-blades flashing up and down in the sun like the pistons in a harvest reaper.

It had given me a stimulus to see the lamp at sunrise—inscribed with Arabic characters and fine filigree, it was a goldsmith's masterpiece if I ever saw one; it had blazed like a bonfire in my arms, like the Gold Pot from Rainbow's End. But the woman grabbed it from me to wrap it in her cloak—I wish you could have seen the way she ran with it, hugging it to her bosom, patting it, talking to it as if it were a baby—*oui,* she made a sling for me to carry it by, also hiding its golden flare. But the Arabs following us could see it, all right. Sacred blue! They never let up for a minute. *Enfin,* when my back was breaking the woman would take the lamp from me and carry it for a little while, but it was too heavy for her to carry far, and I did most of the toting. That lamp took on poundage at every mile, too. Seventy pounds at first, by mid-afternoon it seemed more like seventy tons. I learned why millionaires have stooped shoulders as I stumbled with that treasure lamp across those scorching sands.

As we fled toward the end of that day, that Arab mowing-machine still behind us, I was done to bones and rags. The woman's bronze skin was immune to the sun, and those fiends behind us were sired by camels, but I was ready to lie down and play banquet for the vultures.

It was the lamp that kept me going then, *messieurs!* Only that lamp! When my legs broke down, the woman would crank them up again by unwrapping that *kickshaw* and giving me a look. When I croaked in thirst, she would give me a drink of that lamp-story. I forgot my sprained muscles, my shriveling stomach, my crippled back. "Remember, *Sidi,* you are carrying the most priceless relic in existence," she would say in a soft whip-voice that drove me on. I guess I was too brainless to catch sunstroke under that furnace sun. I had traded my brains for a lamp.

But I will shorten the rest of that grueling race across the desert—I promised you a tale of the Arabian Nights—and bring it to that tea-time when we arrived once more at the brink of that terrific crevice. I do not know if we had run in a circle or whether the canyon made a tangent to cut across our course, but we raced at sundown over a hill of brambles, and suddenly that chasm reappeared in front of us. El Azrek's harvesting machine was not far behind us, coming *plut, plut, plut* down a sunset-reddened slope, and it looked like the end.

Those Arabs thought they had us then, and they charged, yelling their savage heads off.

I went sick. They were so close I could see their hate-scribbled faces, bulging eyeballs, teeth clenched fiercely in wind-parted beards. The two in the lead resembled the creatures of a nightmare—that Nubian headsman, and a big shiek with orange whiskers that billowed back

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like blowing flame. The Devil and his bodyguard from Sheol!

"My husband!" She pointed at Orangebeard. "El Azrek, by all the fiends! We must never let him take us! Fly! Fly!"

Fleet as a *kudu* antelope, she raced off down the chasm-brink. Somehow I gathered the gristle to sprint after her. A misstep would have meant instant death, and I expected any second to step over the edge of that trench and spin down to the boiling mud below.

It was the woman who stepped off into that gulch, not me! *Sacré Nom de Dieu!* Before my very eyes! Figure to yourself the shock when she disappeared with no shade in that vermillion sundown to aid her usual vanishing act. I howled when she stepped over that ledge. I skidded to a halt with locked kneecaps, and leaned out over that abyss, expecting to see her falling body.

But she was not falling down that gulch. Nothing was falling save long shafts of twilight and some pebbles my boots had kicked over. "Yow!" I wailed. "Right in thin air she has made herself invisible!"

Then I heard her, and jumped. "The ladder!" her voice was calling. Up from the dizzy emptiness beyond my boots, like an echo she had left suspended in space. "*Ferangi*—the rope ladder! There beside you in the bushes!"

CHOKING, I looked down. The ledge was undermined at that point, its rim overgrown with brush. She was under the overhang, clinging like an acrobat to a heart-sickening Jacob's ladder which dribbled like a skimpy vine down that smooth-polished canyon wall. Only that particular rope ladder went to hell! I turn cold to remember it—a precarious rigging of hemp moored to the clifftop by a couple of shaky posts. It must have been hung there by the engineers who had tacked up that careless trestle, and it looked ten times as insecure. It was horrible.

The green-eyed woman waved up at me, crying to hand her the lamp. Am I sweating as I tell about it? But my forehead was snowing as I leaned out to lower that heavy antique; saw her grab, catch, hold on. "Now come down after me!" she shrilled. "El Azrek and his fiends will not see us down here. Before they discover where we went, we can reach the bottom!"

No time to wonder what we'd do when we got down there. Swinging over that brink on those creaking ropes, I had an idea I would not live long enough to find out. I started down.

I made the mistake of looking at my feet as I fumbled to find the ladder-rungs. The depths below made my brains spin, and the gravity of that drop grabbed me by the ankles and tried to pull me off the crossropes.

Have you ever heard a ship's rigging crying at the strain of windy weather? Those hempen cables in my clutch cried out like that. When we were quarter-way down they were stretching to a groan; and halfway, the thing began to swing.

Visualize that—myself and that woman five hundred feet in the air!—that ladder swooping in wide, swishy arcs like a pendulum. Don't talk to me about ladders! Today the sight of any ladder makes me ill. Just last month I saw some sailors climb down a ship's side on a Jacob's ladder, and I went to bed for a week.

"Descend! Descend!" the woman called up faintly. I was paralyzed on those swinging strands, and she was going down the rungs like a trapeze artist. "Plant your feet in the middle of the crossropes and it will not sway! Do not be afraid—!"

"I can't! The ropes are breaking under me!" I sobbed.

"They are not breaking under me!" her voice came back. "I am heavier than you —I am carrying the lamp!"

I called that woman a trapeze artist, but she was something more. To scale down a ladder with a seventy-pound load slung on your back—that is something beyond mere skill.

She saw I was stalled in panic, and she started to sing me that lamp-yarn again. But I think I was becoming a little cynical on that ladder—beginning to realize that

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a fortune may cost more than it is worth. Praise that lamp as she would, the woman could not lure me past the halfway mark of that aerial descent. It wanted more than a sales talk to budge my numbed knees, and it got it!

"Merciful Allah!" the woman's chant broke into a shriek. "They have seen us from above and they are running to cut the cables. Come down! Come down—!"

Those brigands had failed to spy the rigging in the bushes at first. They had dashed along the clifftop quite a distance beyond those mooring posts; then some vulture had looked over and spotted us, and now they were rushing back to hack at the guy-ropes with their choppers.

I went down that ladder, then! How I went. I left the palms of both hands on those hampen cables; took the arches out of my boots on the rungs. A hundred feet from the bottom, the woman screamed out that Old Orange-beard was chopping at the top-shrouds, and I had a vision of Gabriel getting ready to play taps for me on his horn.

"Slide! Wrap your arms and legs around the guy-ropes and slide!" the woman screamed. "You are almost at the bottom—!"

I pulled an icy breath, wrapped my arms and legs around the guy-ropes, slid! I burned my chest on that descent. But I reached that canyon bottom just one toot ahead of Gabriel; the woman jerked me sideways under a rock; there was a roar like Niagara breaking loose from an ice jam—*swish!—crrrrrash!*—then it seemed as if a year went by while that avalanche of rope kept coming down.

Knots whiplashed past my face and hawsers coiled up in writhing piles; I don't know how long I crouched staring at that mass of lunging hemp—one year, a decade, perhaps a century.

Then something slapped me in the face, something that wasn't rope. Something hot and sticky that smelled like sulphur. Only then was I aware of the fuming fog around me, squirts of flying goo in the air, a splut and gurgle as of a million kettles boiling. Only then did I realize I was at the bottom of that canyon on the bank of that hellish river.

"We are lost!" I groaned at the green-eyed woman, pointing at the brown tide which galloped past the bank where we crouched befogged.

"No," she stood up calmly. "Those fools have cut their ladder, now they cannot descend to follow us. Bring the lamp, *Ferangi*. There is our boat!"

V

MESSIEURS, I will remember the boat trip I took down that canyon until I die, and I think as I lie in my coffin I will still remember it. And I will laugh at Satan's Netherworld; I will tell him his subway of horrors is just second-class.

"Listen," I will jeer. "There is a big trench somewhere in Arabia that beats any of your infernal drains all hollow. I took a barge ride down that stream which makes your tour up the River Styx seem an excursion on the Seine in comparison."

I will tell him about the mud bank where the trip commenced; about the scow beached there in a stink of mire. I will tell him how the woman and I pushed off with the lamp; how the barge went swirling downstream on that torrent of bubbling glue. He will paw brimstone with his hoofs when I describe the wild bends of that channel; and when I tell how that muck-flood hissed and spat, he will turn from red to green with envy.

"Corday," he will bow, "I have met my match at last. You are the bigger liar." And if lies are half truths, then the Old Scratch will be right, for I couldn't describe that raging river of mud by half.

Non, I couldn't do justice to that mud stream any more than I could explain how the green-eyed woman knew about that barge, or account for any other of Mother Nature's alarming wonders. It was in a class with Stromboli, volcanoes, earthquakes, things like that.

We went down that goo-flood like a chip in a millrace of lava. It bombarded our

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scow with gouts of muck. On the sharp bends, it threatened to capsize us, drown us in turkey-gobbling swirls of mire. Our little barge plunged and wallowed, splattering through storms of semi-solid surf, *tubbedy, bub, bub, bub!*

That was no *Maid of the Mist,* that barge. It was just a raft of palm-trunks with planks whacked up for sideboards and a sort of crude rudder at the stern. The green-eyed woman crouched at the steering oar, and I huddled in the center of the deck, my arms around the lamp, ducking bursts of hot slime.

Bursts of slime? The whole surface of that river was popping, exploding. Geysers spouted thirteen feet in the air. Blasts of steam spurted from the muck, hurling mudballs with the force of shrapnel. Weird clouds rolled across the thrashing channel, stifling as the smoke of burning rubber—and the canyon walls were obscured.

Any second I expected the barge would crash, provided it was not first blown to pieces by a geyser or swamped by the liquid sludge slopping over the sides.

Parbleu! as we shot down that canyon in that batter of scalding mud I felt like a bug on a potato peel going down a gutter of bacon grease. How long that excursion lasted I have no idea. I only know the canyon zigzagged like a chain of lighting, and we followed the zigzag at a tremendous rate of speed. *Le bon Dieu* only knows how the woman steered that punt.

Around zooping bends where we buried our beam ends under—through fogs of sticky steam—over rapids of cooking mucilage—between scalding geysers and fusillades of bursting mire she steered as though she held the helm of a gondola. Such a cruise could not be measured in minutes or miles. It might have lasted an hour, yet it seemed to me like an eternity.

The end? The sort you would expect of a cruise with such a beginning. A place where the canyon widened into a great rock-rimmed basin, a vast pot-hole of the gorge where that wild muck-torrent returned to its volcanic sewers. Goulash in a kettle, stirred to whirling circles by an unseen spoon. A hole at the bottom of the kettle sucks the center of the whirl down into a cone. Any fly in that swirling soup would be drawn faster and faster into that suction cone. That, magnified, was what we came to at the end of that mud river—a mile before we got there I could hear that whirlpool roaring—and our barge was the helpless fly.

Sacré bleu! we flew out of that canyon and were twice around the basin before I could make out what it was.

"A maelstrom!" I screamed at the woman. "We are caught in the current of a maelstrom!"

Round and round we went in mile-rimmed circles while I gaped in stunned horror at the hub of the awful thing. Five times we made the circle, each time a little faster as we neared the inner whirl. Any second I expected some spiral pull of suction to grab the barge and yank it spinning into that death-cone.

"Help! Help me hold the rudder!" The green-eyed woman's cries shrilled faintly through the boiler-steam roaring of that vortex. "We must steer the barge into the outer currents! Our only chance is to jump for shore—!"

I FLUNG myself to her side; jammed my shoulder against the steering oar. I could hear the tiller post cracking as the scow swung over a little. I didn't see any shore. From what I could see through the dusk and vapor, the walls of that pot-hole were like the walls of a quarry, bowl-shaped by the whirling maelstrom, slippery as the sides of a crock. Where the canyon flood rushed in, the whirlpool was churned to a wild surf. But at the far side, the wall flattened into a sort of beach where a boat, if it escaped the whirlpool's vortex, might ground.

"We must jump there!" the woman shrieked. "The current is too swift for us to make fast. Next time around I will steer in as close as I can. You must take the lamp in your arms and jump!"

I wanted to curse at the woman for that. I looked at that lamp in the middle of

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the barge-deck, and I looked at that breach in the basin-wall as we shot past. It was just a muddy ledge, not much wider than a table. Jumping from the barge to that ledge was on a par with leaping to a baggage platform from an express train as it took a curve. Then I saw that sucking maw in the whirlpool's center. Even a flying jump for the moon would have been preferable.

"Next time around!" came the woman's cry. "Get ready! Take the lamp!"

Leaping from the tiller, I grabbed up that confounded antique and crouched ready to spring from the side of the barge. Why did I add the hazard of an armload? Well, I had not learned my lesson yet. Amazing, is it not, what we mortals will endure for a million dollars? "All or nothing, Corday," I was gritting to myself. *Oui,* I did not believe the lamp would make the difference between missing or making that ledge; it did not even occur to me to throw it.

Shoving with all her might, the green-eyed woman steered the barge along the outside rim of the whirlpool. The canyon-mouth whisked by, and we swept around the turn so fast the wall-curve was a streaky blur.

"Ready!" the woman shrilled. "I am holding as close to the wall as I can! Here it comes! Now! Jump! Jump!"

I sprang. Soul of Saint Sebastian! I put my last ounce of power and nerve into that spring. Lamp hugged to chest, I made a wild leap; hit the ledge on two feet, upright; skidded as though on a shelft of ice; crashed into the caved bank and sat down. By the time I got to my feet the woman was coming around again. The barge was nearly opposite when she dropped the steering oar, ran to the side and crouched to leap. I could see the emerald gleam of her stare as she marked the timing and distance. Like a panther she was crouched—a bronze flash through the steam, and she landed lithely at my side.

I won't forget to tell the Devil how that barge sped away, how it swept around that whirlpool in smaller and smaller circles; how finally it was gulped down that roaring, sucking throat. That is another thing I will remember after I am dead—and this!

The green-eyed woman took my arm and conducted me up the caved-in side of the maelstrom-bowl. At the top I saw desert, blue sand hills, evening stars. The cigarette-package moon was on the horizon again, and there in the western distance under a haze was an expanse of silver sea. I stared at that vista of sand, sky and sea, and I began to cry. I was so glad to be out of that canyon and maelstrom that I dropped the lamp and sat down beside it, and shook and wept like a baby.

"Look." I unwrapped the lamp and sobbed. "We are safe with it at last."

My companion was looking, that is so; but not down at me, not at the lamp. She had turned to stare off at the hills which enfolded the canyon, and she was staring with a squint of such emerald-fierce intensity that I jumped up to see what she was looking at.

Merely a dust cloud, *messieurs.* A little moon-tinted dust cloud that was traveling down from a distant ridge toward the lower levels where we stood.

"What is the matter?" I asked. "Why do you stare at that dust puff?"

"That is El Azrek," her toneless voice was a knell. "Allah curse him for a fiend, he has crossed the chasm somewhere, and his men have regained their horses! They know the boiling river ends at this whirlpool! They are riding hard to find us!" She wheeled at me, white-lipped, sobbing. "Pick up the lamp, *Ferangi!* We must run on—!"

I COULDN'T do it. If that lamp had been made of feathers I couldn't have picked it up. I sagged there glaring at the lamp, at the woman, at that down-rolling dust puff, and I couldn't have run another step if Shaitan and all his Black Uhlans were charging down at me. For twenty solid hours I had been on the run, and I think you will agree I had taken a beating in those twenty hours.

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In that scrimmage in the fortress I had lost three teeth. I had shredded my nerves on that canyon bridge. A day in the desert had scorched me to a fig; I had torn my soul out going own that Jacob's ladder; the river had parboiled my remains, and that maelstrom had removed the stuffing and left me ready to serve.

Oui, I was done. Broiled, baked, grilled; smoked dry and covered with a gravy of mud. From head to foot I was thorn-slashed, blistered, dripping. Swaying there in the moonlight I would have made a splendid centerpiece for a platter of garbage.

"I can go no farther," I croaked at the woman. "I am used up! Through!"

Echo of hoofbeats spattered through the moonlight, and the green-eyed woman spun at me. "Only a little way farther!" she begged. "Carry the lamp as far as the sea! Once we reach the sea we can run in the surf and they will never find our tracks! We are saved once we reach the sea!"

"Be damned to the sea," I moaned. "I cannot move!"

"Think of the lamp! All the riches it can bring you—"

I was thinking of that. *Hein!* All those rainbow visions, they had gone before my eyes; in their place I was seeing mirages of myself chopped to hamburg by El Azrek and his boys.

"To the devil with the lamp!" I raged. "These are the riches it has brought me—a broken back, parboiled eyes, a burning throat and hands. It has led me here to die a rat's death in the desert. Would God I had never seen the thing!"

Ah, suddenly I hated it. I turned and kicked it as if it were a cuspidor. But you should have seen the way that woman flew at me when I kicked it. "No, no!" she screamed, pulling at my arm. "Rob it, *Ferangi!* Rob the lamp! One chance you have to rob it, and it will bring you anything you wish! Close your eyes and do as I say! Hurry! There is not much time!"

"I am through with robbing it!" I snarled at her. "I would like to throw it into that whirling crater of mud and you with it!" I struck her off with my elbow, sent her reeling back with such violence that she dropped that empty wine jug she had somehow clung to throughout that race. "Get on!" I shouted at her, sinking to my knees. "Take this cursed junkpiece with you! *Va-t'-en!*"

"But you do not understand!" she swayed back at me. "You do not comprehend! I mean *rob* the lamp! *Rob* it! Like this!"

Thunder of heaven! she polished her knuckles against her arm, and for the first time I caught what she meant. I tell you, it crashed over me like one avalanche. The whole fantastic nonsense of it crashed over me. Her Baghdad-accented English which had been fuddled by my French ear. Her lamp-yarn which I had construed as fact! The flowery phrases I had thought mere exaggerations. The "Prince Allah Deen"—"Bring you anything you wish!"—"Rob the lamp!"

Do you get it, my friends? Do you get it as *I* got it—there between the eyes? Well, she meant *rub* the lamp! She meant literally it would bring me anything I wished! Allah Deen—that was the Arabic pronunciation of Aladdin! Name of God! she had told me a fairy story—a nursery tale I had swallowed as actuality! I had bartered my life, suffered the tortures of the damned, to steal Aladdin's Wonderful Lamp!

VI

SO! YOU knew it all along, *messieurs,* but I did not know it until that moment in the adventure when I petered out there at trail's end.

"Infernal woman!" I squalled. "Is this what I am going to be butchered for? Your crackpot legend about the lamp of Aladdin which I took to be true—*true*—!"

"But it is true! All that I have told you is the truth!" the woman cried. "Scrub the lamp with your knuckles, *Ferangi!* A *djinn* will come—yes, yes, the genie in the lamp! Close your eyes as you scrub and a genie will appear and give you anything you wish! You will see!"

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By the bones of Saint Philip of Benguela! I was so mad I went almost blind. I was wild. I wanted to wring the woman's neck for spinning that Arabian Nights yarn, and I wanted someone to wring mine for believing it.

I started up to carry out the first of these two desires, and it looked as if the horsemen racing down from the ridge would carry out the second. They were not far away—maybe two miles. If I intended to throttle that female—

Then I stopped! Stunned by another brain-shock! After all, here was this lamp! Gold! An antique! Certainly treasured in that fortress of Arab thieves! Would bandits risk burning trestles for an antique only? Would a woman of such savagery and steel risk her life's blood on a fairy story? Maybe I went crazy, then. Maybe it was her eyes. Maybe it was that a man condemned will grasp at any straw, but I fell to my knees and rubbed my knuckles on the shoulder of that lamp.

"Harder!" the woman screamed. "Keep your eyes tight shut and rob harder!"

I ground my knuckles into that lamp. Clutching it by the neck, I held it upright in front of me and squeezed shut my eyelids and massaged that big piece of bric-a-brac so hard I could smell the hot metal.

Now you will not believe what I am going to tell you; I did not believe it, myself, at the time. Try to picture it there on that patch of moonlit desert—me, scrubbing that golden lamp—the woman screaming at me to rub harder—then a squeaking!—a jittery, monkeylike squeaking at my elbow, as if a kinkajou had jumped out of Nothingness and landed at my side!

I spun back on my knees with popped eyes. A man was there! A mite of a man! A tiny creature not over twenty-four inches tall, black as tar with catlike ivory teeth, wee white-slitted eyes, a wizened gnome-face wrinkled like a raisin. Squeaking at me like a monkey, dressed in red fez, yellow bloomers, long curly-tipped slippers of blue leather. Rings flashed on his bird-claw fingers; jewels sparkled in his vest—an imp for the bottle!—a genie from the Arabian Nights!—a conjuration straight out of Abracadabra. *Dieu!* I wanted to fall on my face when he raised twelve-inch arms and gave me a salaam.

I jumped back and stared like a strawless scarecrow at a blackbird. Behind me the green-eyed woman murmured, "Make a wish, *Ferangi;* ask the spirit of the lamp of Allah Deen. One chance you have to shut your eyes and make a wish, and the wish shall be gratified. What is it that you wish for most in the world—?"

My brains were so stunned I could scarcely think, much less wish. Staring at the imp beside the lamp, I was shatterpated. I knew I must be moonstruck, dreaming. But at that moment I heard a wild whoop from those horsemen pounding down through the night—a whoop too bloodcurdling for any dream—and I shut my eyes and bellowed my wish.

"I wish to God I was out of Arabia!"

Whack! Blackness swept over me! Spinning, rushing blackness, as quick as that! Through that lightless night I was whirled like a leaf in a vacuum. For miles I seemed to whirl, breathless, blinded, dumb—on and on across limitless space—a void full of wind-rush, motion, watery sounds, blurred echo of far-off voices. Then I was sinking. Sinking into a soundless blank. Then nothing. . . .

THE first thing I saw was the bottle of Johnny Walker. Then someone said, "Now how did that blighter ever get here? By jove, he's a French Legionnaire—"

I sat bolt upright, blinked the grogginess out of my eyes, gave a yell. I was in bed in a room! I saw white walls, window-casements, a door, table, chairs—

Even after my vision cleared everything swayed, tipped and swam. Sunlight kept climbing up and down the wall in a way most incredible as I stared at a picture of King George on the wall; at the bottle on the table; at the men in white talking in a corner; at the officer in the doorway. He wore khaki and looked at me through a monocle.

"Hello! The chap's awake. Only a

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Frenchman could survive a bop like that."

Only a Frenchman could survive such an impossible awakening. "*Sacré!* You are English."

"Right you are. And now," he said, stepping over the doorsill, "do you mind explaining yourself? We aren't quite used to having Foreign Legion deserters here on the Picadilly."

I opened my mouth to tell him Foreign Legionnaires weren't used to finding themselves on the Picadilly, but a muscle stuck in my tongue. The room swam. Everything tipped and swayed. One of the men at room's end turned and walked toward me, chuckling. He had a red, roast-beef face, and he was shaking drops of water from a fever thermometer.

"Pukka fellow," he told the officer, aiming the thermometer at me. "Hundred and five a while ago, but you can't kill the French. You should have heard him carrying on. Thinks he's Sinbad or somebody. Keeps mumbling about Aladdin's lamp—"

"Aladdin!" I gasped. "The lamp! I rubbed it! The green-eyed woman told me to rub it! She said the genie would appear and—"

"What's this about Aladdin's lamp?" a voice rumbled. The figure of John Bull in a naval commander's uniform stepped in through the door behind the khaki Sandhurst officer. "So the scoundrel admits the theft, does he? Speak up, fellow," he roared at me, "what do you know about this job?"

"I was in Arabia!" I panted. "I—" My tongue jammed again. It jammed when I saw another figure coming through the door. A big Arab shiek whose presence crowded the room and made the walls tilt every which way. I screamed, "Orange-beard! That's him! The green-eyed woman's husband! He's followed me here!"

Hands caught me as I tried to leap out of bed. The white room spun. I must have put up a brisk tussle. Afterwards there were pillow feathers all over the place, the Johnny Walker was smashed on the floor and I was pinned down like Gulliver under an army corps of Englishmen.

"Now," the one with the John Bull face was roaring down, "if you're sane enough to talk, just what does this nonsense mean?"

I told my story. Graphically and as best I could without the use of gestures, I told it. Those Britishers were not as skeptical of my account as you are at the present moment, *messieurs.* One by one they got up off my legs, arms and diaphragm, and when I reached that climax where the genie appeared, they were not skeptical at all.

They winked and blinked, made faces, shot quick glances at Orange-beard. All sorts of British expressions they wore when I gasped to a finish, but unbelief was not among them. The man whose features were like red roast beef jabbed the thermometer into my mouth when I was through. He said, "George! The chap's really normal."

"The French are never normal!" John Bull snapped. "Who but a Gascon would try to steal Aladdin's lamp?"

"Who but an Englishman would stand there belching, 'Haw!' if I did?" I shouted. "Someone is whisked from the Arabian desert to the Picadilly, and the British take his temperature! *Non,* and there stands El Azrek—that woman's husband!"

I WISH you could have heard the sound that came out of Orange-beard's whiskers. An Arab can belch like nobody on earth. It is the equivalent in insults of a British stare, and Orange-beard gave it to me when I hollered and pointed at his face.

"Lucky that's only curry and the Caïd understands no English." The grizzled, fat navy officer frowned. "Have a nice international situation in Asir if it got around that woman was in El Azrek's harem. I must say, Corday, you've strained his relations enough as it is."

"But he left her!" I gagged. "In Bagdad where he stole the lamp—"

"Bagdad be blowed! Stole the lamp, be blowed!" the John Bull roared. "El Azrek bought that lamp in the bazaar at Jizan—"

"Bought it!" I choked. "He didn't murder a—and hide it in his—but I tell you,

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I saw it there! In his Arabian fortress of thieves!"

"Fortress of thieves is right!" came the bull-lunged answer. "Listen, Gascon! That fort is a prison! The Caïd is in charge of that place and it's full of the toughest batch of caravan raiders and Red Sea pirates you ever heard of. For a year El Azrek has been working alongside the British Government to police this coast—why, he's one of our most trusted allies! The woman didn't know that when she sold him that cheap lamp in the bazaar!"

I was strangling. I whispered, "She sold him that lamp—?"

"She's sold them by the dozen! Goes from town to town, palming off those brass lamps as antiques. Told you it was Aladdin's lamp, eh? That's a new one! What she didn't tell you—it's worthless brass covered by fake gold leaf, with a small oil reservoir at the top, air holes in the bottom and a trap door in the side that springs like the lid of a Jackinabox."

Room, Englishmen and Al Azrek swam around me, and I did not want to hear any more, but John Bull's voice boomed on. "Well, that woman sells those trick lamps into some sheik's palace or rich merchant's house, but she doesn't sell 'em into prisons. I suppose she heard El Azrek was rich, but she didn't know he ran a jail, and when she found out where he had gone with the infernal lamp she must've had a fit. Prison was just the right place for that piece of junk, too, if only you hadn't helped her sneak it out of there like an idiot! Do you know who that woman was, you fool?"

I made weak sounds of not knowing.

"That woman was one of the cleverest jewel thieves in the East. Kedija the Key! As for what she called the genie in the lamp—that's the blasted pigmy boy she teams with—Little Hamid! In the lamp—my God! That pair have cleaned out the coffers all the way from Cape Town to Constantinople working that lamp trick.

"With that midget hiding in the lamp, the woman sells it in the bazaar. Buyer takes it home; then the pigmy sneaks out at night and robs the house. Aladdin's Wonderful Lamp! Well, that pigmy couldn't get out of it in that prison, so Kedija got you to fetch him out; not only that, made you lug him on your back and take the worst part of the risk. El Azrek thought you were trying to pull off a prison-break. Wait till he hears!"

I whispered faintly, "Kedija the Key! Little Hamid! He was in that lamp when I stole it out of that fortress! I—I carried him all that time on my back!" Somehow I was on my feet. Swaying. Cursing. I caught the table; screamed. "Where is she? Where is that jade?"

"El Azrek threw them both into a mud hole," the John Bull snapped. "I can't make out from his description what kind of a place it was—some sort of bloody mud whirlpool in the desert, it seems. Anyway, he caught 'em near it and chucked them in. You'd have gone in with them if you hadn't been a white man. He thought you might be English so he brought you here for us to look at on the Picadilly. You're lucky you're alive, man. That woman slugged you over the noggin so hard with a wine jug that she shattered it into a thousand bits. The jug, I mean."

He thought I was stupid for believing the green-eyed woman's story; he thought no Englishman could have believed in Aladdin's Wonderful Lamp. He did not see that vixen's emerald eyes, nor did he hear her sing that Arabian Nights tale on the Red Sea beach.

They bandaged my head, those British, and put me back in bed. Six weeks later they returned me to the French Foreign Legion. I still possess the scar where that woman struck me from behind while I made a wish with closed eyes. I? It makes to me no difference whether she was Kedija the Key and that imp was Little Hamid. *Non,* that only convinces me. Such jewel thieves as that, *messieurs*—such a prison-break—such a lamp—well, if it was not the lamp of Aladdin, it was every bit as wonderful. I do not laugh at the Arabian Nights, you comprehend. I went through one of them. . . .

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OLD Thibaut Corday grunted an exclamation point, and leaned back in his chair to let us know the story was over. Algerian twilight was stretching its blue-gauze veils across the Boulevard Sadi Carnot, and the tootle and thump of the Kasbah dance joints came sifting under our café awning to replace the echoes of Arabia. The young British consulate agent stared at Old Thibaut Corday, started to say something, swallowed.

"Alors," the ancient Legion veteran reminded him, "do I win the bottle of Dubonnet?"

"Right." The Englishman nodded. "If you'll explain how that pigmy or whatever your genie was—how it kept alive all that day in the desert. The sun beating on that lamp like that—nothing to drink and—"

"And why didn't it kill him when I flung the lamp down those stairs?" The old Frenchman shook his head grimly. "Ah, I wish I had fractured every bone in the little rat's body, but I suppose he did not even feel the jolting, like those devils who go over Niagara Falls in a barrel. As for heat, he was an African pigmy. Recall, too, how the woman wrapped her cloak around the lamp? How she patted it and talked to it as she carried it now and then? That *poissarde!* She must have been telling him to enjoy the free ride and sneaking him drinks of that fig wine. When I think of how I lugged that little monster! The woman knew he could never run fast or far on his twelve-inch legs. She used me for a camel. A sacred camel!"

"Twelve-inch legs or your legs!" the English boy cried. "What was that light you saw in that tower, and if it wasn't a magic lamp how did you get from that desert in Arabia to the Picadilly?"

"The light?" Old Thibaut Corday grunted. "The Caïd's radio station. His favorite plaything, I found out. Turned it on for an hour every midnight, as the jade probably learned. I saw the flare of the generators. And the Picadilly?" The old veteran grinned. "Orange-beard lugged me there over his saddle. Did I not say at the beginning how one minute I was in Arabia and the next thing I knew I was on British soil? *Eh bien,* I woke up on a British patrol boat, a Red Sea cruiser named the *Picadilly*. A British boat—not so?—is British soil."

He gestured with finality.

The young English consular agent was already fumbling in his pocket. Old Thibaut Corday nodded approvingly. "I thing I have made my point fairly clear, *messieurs.* Which was—if you recall—that nursery tales have a basis in fact. You see, then, the basis behind Aladdin's Wonderful Lamp. Perhaps there was no such thing as magic lamp and genie, but I will bet you the woman got hold of the right angle to that story.

"Somewhere in ancient Arabia there was an Aladdin. He traveled around with a midget in a lamp, and he was one damn big jewel thief!"

The young British agent ordered two bottles of Dubonnet.

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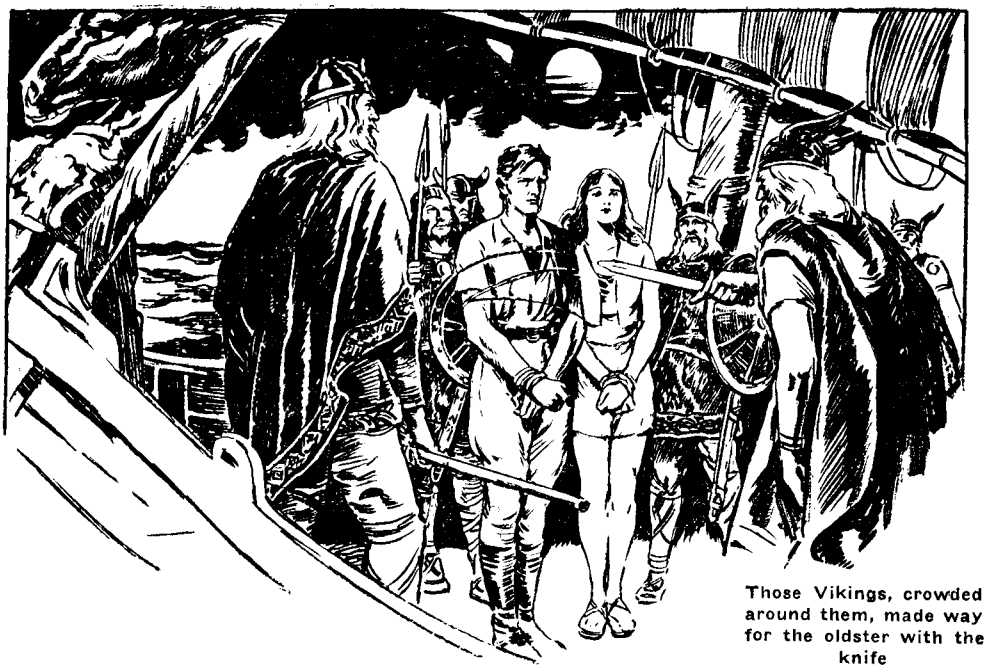

Those Vikings, crowded around them, made way for the oldster with the knife

Minions of the Moon

By WILLIAM GRAY BEYER

Begin now this great fantastic novel of a young American who slept for six thousand years and woke in a world that was greeting its second dawn

IN FEBRUARY, 1939, Dr. Kelso perfects an anaesthetic infinitely more powerful than any then in use. The first patient he tries it on is Mark Nevins; and to the doctor's horror, Mark remains unconscious for twenty-two days and then slips quietly into a state of suspended animation. . . .

When Mark awakes, he finds himself in a locker-lined mausoleum, containing food, clothes, weapons and everything the conscience-stricken doctor could provide. Mark hasn't the least idea where he is nor how many years—or hundreds or even thousands of years—he has slept.

Things swiftly become more confusing. Addressed as "Hi, North American," by a disembodied voice, he believes he is mad and decides to humor himself by inviting the voice to take shape. This it does, and Mark finds himself staring at his identical twin. "Your body," the voice explains, "was handier than any other I could think up on the spur of the moment."

THE voice introduces himself as Omega. He is, he says, a brain, one of the last survivors of the Moon Men, certain of whom before their extinction had provided everlasting life for their brains, and indestructible shelters to house them.

"But they are nearly all dead," Omega explains. "All they could think of to do when they no longer had any bodies was to worry. Finally they had to invent problems to worry about. And even that palled. So the brains just stopped functioning. But I had a sense of humor and great curiosity. That saved me. I often leave my brain and project myself around to see what's doing on the other planets. That's how I found you."

This story began in last week's Argosy

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Mark suggests that if Omega can leave his brain and return to it at will, the brain itself probably is not essential to Omega's continued existence. Omega, in spite of his wizardlike intelligence, had never considered the matter in that light and, intrigued, sets off to investigate.

IN THE meantime, Mark dresses himself in the spun-glass fabric garments the doctor has left in the lockers, takes a gun, an axe, a compass, and a hand-machine-gun that fires poisoned, needlelike bullets, and sets out on a tour of exploration. All about him is dense wilderness. Civilization as he knew it seems to have been wiped out in some great catastrophe.

Man has reverted to savagery, Mark finds out when he is captured by a tribe of hairy savages, cannibalistic and primitive, who speak some gibberish he cannot understand. With Nona, a lovely fellow-captive, Mark manages to make his escape from the savages' *carte du jour*.

Nona speaks excellent English, Mark is relieved to discover; her people live in a nearby walled city, having preserved the civilized state they knew in the twenty-first century. She has run away, she tells him, to escape marriage with the mate chosen for her by the Eugenic Council of her city. Mark is immediately interested in her but wonders how she will feel about a man roughly six thousand years older than she.

Is the forest they are once more joined by Omega, who seems to be keeping a fatherly eye on them both. Omega provides dinner in a manner more suitable to a two-a-day magician than to the greatest intellect in the Universe.

He tells them about two other brains in existence at least as powerful as his. They belonged to a Russian scientist and his assistant who also had been interested in self-preservation when their world was threatened with destruction. Omega warns Mark and Nona that these brains are powerful and completely ruthless.

"Only by keeping them ignorant of my existence have I been able to escape their attention. And now if you will excuse me there are one or two other little matters I must attend to. . . ."

CHAPTER VII

NOCTURNE FOR TOMORROW

THE going was a bit rough in the new direction, but that fact didn't bother Mark in the least. Helping Nona over obstructions was just as pleasant a way of putting in his time as he could wish for. Her grateful smiles of thanks were ample payment for the scratches he got separating thorny undergrowth for her.

"Have you any idea at all where we are going?" he inquired.

Nona hesitated before answering. "I'm not sure, but I think the nearest place in this direction is New Haven. It is not directly south, but more to the west. We must not go there, though."

"Why not?"

"Because the city is friendly with mine and would keep me prisoner until they could return me to the council."

"We don't want that," Mark declared. "You said this city was New Haven. Then we should be somewhere south of Hartford. Was that the city in which your ancestors settled?" He remembered New Haven on crisp fall afternoons. Feathered hats. Chrysanthemums. Programs for a quarter.

"Yes," she replied. "New Haven is our closest neighbor and we often send caravans to exchange goods. But I've never been there. Women are not allowed to travel. Only armed men make up the caravans."

The sky was growing darker and the little light which penetrated through the trees was scarcely sufficient to enable them to pick their way through the dense forest. Mark spotted a clear space, devoid of vegetation, beneath a giant evergreen. This, he decided, would make an ideal place to spend the night.

"It just occurred to me that it has been quite a time since I've done any tramping through a New England woods. So far today I've seen no dangerous wild life, except for those unpleasant cannibals. But of course that doesn't prove anything. How about it?"

Nona's eyes widened. She frowned. "Oh gracious, I thought you knew! There are wildcats—thousands of them! Nobody ever goes near the forest after nightfall. Even the armed caravans will travel miles out of their way to get away from them. But

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you can kill them, can't you? You're so wonderful. They won't come near us when you use your magic, will they?"

"Magic?"

"Yes, the magic that you used against the savages. You pointed your finger and they fell dead. Even Omega wasn't that smart. *He* had to use a club."

Mark winced realizing that the girl thought him some kind of wizard with all sorts of weird powers. He was flattered, of course, but sporadic caution caused him to try to get things on a reasonable plane. "That wasn't magic. All it was was this needle gun. It's so small you thought it was my finger. It shoots needles, tipped with poison that stuns the victim for several hours. Simple, see?

"But I'm afraid it might not work against wildcats. Maybe the needles couldn't penetrate their fur. Maybe I'd better build a fire."

AS HE talked he had been fumbling in his pockets, although he knew that he would find no matches. That was one thing the old doctor had not thought of. Or maybe he had. There might have been a means of making fire in one of the cabinets, an old-fashioned tinder box or some such contrivance, for ordinary matches would have crumbled to dust with the years. He hadn't searched as carefully as he might have. His fingers encountered a spare clip to fit the automatic he had lost. A sudden train of thought snapped him into action. Tinder box—gunpowder. . . .

An eerie scream rose in the still air, sending a shiver down his backbone, and confirming Nona's story. Removing a cartridge from the clip, he used the point of a clasp-knife to pry the bullet loose. Then he carefully selected some dried leaves, crumpled them, and mixed in the powder from the brass cartridge. Some small, dried twigs completed the tinder. Then in the fast fading light he managed to find a hard rock, about the size of his hand.

"Hold your breath," he requested, and struck the blunt end of the steel axe a sharp blow. Nothing happened. "I should have joined the Boy Scouts," he mourned, striking another futile blow. The third, however, produced a shower of sparks, although none of them landed on the tinder. On about the tenth try the tinder flared with a sudden greenish flame and continued burning merrily while Mark piled on heavier twigs until he had a sizable blaze. He was surprised, naturally; but took care not to show it.

"That should do the trick," he said, satisfied. "We'd better fix up a place to sleep before it gets too dark. We can make a couple of soft mattresses if we collect enough of these leaves."

"I'll do that," Nona answered. "You hack off some branches with the axe and I'll strip off the leaves. Then we can use the wood for the fire."

"Clever girl. Except that the wood, being green, would make more smoke than flame."

"I'm still clever," she retorted. "The smoke will discourage the mosquitoes. And there is enough dry wood within reach to keep the fire blazing."

"Oh-oh. Mosquitoes! I'd forgotten them. It's six thousand years since I've been bitten by one of the pesky critters."

With both of them working energetically it took very little time to collect enough dry wood, leaves and green wood. Fortunately there was but the lightest of breezes and the leaves were in no danger of blowing away. Nona busied herself with arranging them to form a thick matting while Mark chopped the wood into convenient lengths.

Finishing his task he surveyed the result of Nona's efforts with a quizzical eye. She had undoubtedly fashioned a comfortable bed. Not two beds—one bed. The leaves were spread out over a wide area, to a depth of about four inches.

Mark saw immediately that certain implications were staring him right in the eye, but for the life of him he couldn't come to any definite conclusion regarding them. Of course he realized that customs were bound to be changed.

But Nona had seemed to be such a nice

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girl. . . . He was just about to blurt out a leading question when he saw that she was standing beside her handiwork, smiling brightly, evidently expecting some sort of praise.

"Nice job," he said lamely, and turned to sit down near the fire. Look here, he addressed himself sternly, if I'm just going to sit around burdened with a flock of Twentieth Century ethics— But it was no good. He was, heaven help him, unsuspectedly puritanical.

Nona stood looking at Mark's back for a long minute before making up her mind what to do. Then she went over and sat beside him, following his gaze into the fire. The dancing flames seemed to conjure up a picture of a rugged young face just breaking into a smile. Startled, she stole a glance at its living counterpart, wondering if this were more magic or if her own thoughts of him caused her to see the image. But Mark was still staring gloomily into the fire.

"Dearest Mark," she whispered and ran her fingers through his hair. Mark jerked away. Had the creature no shame?

She hesitantly placed her hand on his arm. "Did I . . . Is there anything wrong?" she asked timidly.

Mark smiled. He put a finger under her chin, tilted her head back, and looked searchingly into her eyes. "No," he declared. "Nothing. Not after the way you said that."

Nona smiled. "I'm glad. When you were said, I was sad," she said, naïvely. "But something was wrong. Will you tell me?"

MARK turned again to stare at the fire before venturing to speak. There it was again. If one were to accept the girl's actions and words at their face value and judge them according to standards dead these thousands of years, one might reach a wrong conclusion. Mark's sense of values needed a hasty reconditioning—but he couldn't seem to get on with it.

With all the things that had happened since he had met her it seemed that he had known her for years. And then there were times that he didn't know her at all.

"I'll tell you some other time," he promised, tossing a dry stick in the fire. He licked his lips and sought a reasonably safe topic of conversation. "Now suppose you tell me something of how people live in your city."

Nona shuddered. "They don't. They just exist. I don't mean there is any hardship," she explained. "It's just that life in the city is so monotonous. The people have no initiative. Even their pleasures are directed. And although the hours of work are not long, it always seems that there is no time to do things you want to do. There is always some meeting that you must attend, where stuffy people discuss ways to co-operate more efficiently so that more work may be accomplished in a shorter time. The reason given for this endless quest for efficiency, is to get more time for leisure. But there's not much sense to that if the people are allowed no leisure anyway.

"The Recreation Council insists that you relax according to directions. There are games, contests and all sorts of ways you may spend your own time. But you must decide just what you wish to do on any certain day, and then sign up for it. You can't change your mind at the last minute and do something else. You must appear at the designated recreation place and answer to your name and number. Otherwise you will be punished with extra work hours. I was punished often.

"There was only one recreation that I liked. We were given permission to read the reproductions of any of the ancient books we liked. and that is how I spent most of my time. You would think that when people read of the freedom enjoyed by their ancestors they would have been discontented with their lot. That was the effect it had on me. But just the opposite was true of the rest. They seldom read of the ancients, because it made them mad that their ancestors could have been so frivolous and selfish; so concerned with their individual welfare. So you see my people are really satisfied with the way they

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live. I was the only one who rebelled at having my every move plotted out for me."

"The little rebel, eh? And you didn't care for the husband they picked for you either."

THE eerie wail of a nearby wildcat mingled with Nona's chuckle. "You should have seen him. They picked him because they thought he was stolid enough to counteract the wayward streak in me. There was no other man in the city so submissive and willing to obey. He was never so proud as when he was premitted to take part in some volunteer extra work. I remember the day the man from the Eugenics Council brought him to my father's house. We were introduced and I was told that this was the man the council had chosen for my mate. Then we were left alone. You see, it is the regular procedure when the council chooses two people to be mated to introduce them and then leave them alone for two hours to get acquainted. They then separate and the mating date is set for a day one week later.

"During this week either of the two may decide not to take the other for a mate. Then he or she is introduced to another who has the required gene-determinants. Each person is allowed five choices although seldom does anyone ask for a second choice. It's foolish to do so, for if one person has the same gene-determinants as another, he would differ from the other in only the most superficial characteristics. So there really isn't any choice at all."

"I suppose that after generations of such artificial selection your people would be pretty nearly alike anyway," Mark guessed.

"Oh yes," Nona said. "The art of photography has been almost abandoned. A picture of one man would do for all the men in the city." She chuckled again, and spread her hands. "That's an exaggeration, of course, for there are differences physically, but not nearly so much as I've noted in the pictures in the ancient books. No two people looked alike in those days, did they?"

"Very few," Mark admitted. "But what sort of a ceremony is held when two people are mated?"

"Ceremony?" Nona looked puzzled for a moment. "Oh, I know what you mean. I've read about it. We don't have anything like that. On the appointed day the couple are assigned a house and they occupy it. That is all."

Mark felt this was too direct to be any fun. He forgot, momentarily, that one reason he'd shunned marriage was his dread of a big church wedding.

"Like heck it is, but that's just what I suspected. Tell me some more." He threw another branch on the fire at the sound of a raucous screech. "Do these couples live happily together?"

"Happily? Oh yes, I suppose so. It seemed rather dreary to me. You see, they don't live together in the sense that the ancients did. Neither sees the other except when the day's work and recreation is over. And that amounts to only about ten hours, which includes the sleeping period."

Mark thought this one over a minute. "Pretty clever," he decided. "They don't see enough of each other to quarrel. Not a bad stunt at that. The men are segregated from the women at all other times, I suppose?"

"Yes, of course, Since I was a little girl the only men I have spoken to have been my father, the man from the Eugenics Council and the rabbitlike little slug I was introduced to. I only saw the last two for a few minutes."

Mark grinned. "And Omega and me," he supplemented. "Although Omega is not a man. He's a perambulating thought wave. And what happened to your would-be mate?" Not that he cared—or did he?

NONA rocked back and forth, her hands clasped about her knees. "He looked at me, displayed about thirty-one teeth, and said nothing. I think he was

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scared. I scowled at him and said, 'Scram, you worm.' But I don't think he understood, for he just stood there, the grin fading into a sickly-looking smirk. But he got the idea quickly enough when I opened the door and kicked him out. Quite hard. He went out so fast that he almost stepped on the heels of the Eugenics man. You see I don't know many men. I sometimes wish I did. I think I'd like men a lot. Women are so dreadfully stupid. But maybe you don't think so." She smiled a carbolic smile, and watched his face anxiously.

Mark gazed thoughtfully into the flames. His gloom almost returned, but he shook it off. "No, I can't say I do," he admitted, noncommittally.

Nona smiled irritably. "I didn't think so. But things were different then. People were free! But those others don't matter now. Or . . ." A sudden thought seemed to paralyze her. It was a minute before she spoke. "Tell me. Was there anyone . . . Did you have a mate?" The last words came all in a breathless rush.

Mark looked sharply at her, and then grinned. "No," he assured. "Almost, but not quite."

Nona was silent for a long time. Then suddenly she said: "Did you love her? *I* know about love. The old books explained it, but I really never understood until . . . " She stopped abruptly, evidently influenced again by something she had read.

Mark hesitated. "I'm not so sure I know the answer to that one. I thought I loved her, and I certainly was miserable when she married someone else at the last minute. But I'm not miserable any more, so it's just possible that my emotion wasn't really love. Funny, though. It was hell for a while. . . . Don't ask me. I was never an expert at love, I guess. It only happened once and I'm not so sure just what did happen."

The combined wails of two or three wildcats rent the evening stillness from a point not far away. Mark looked around at the deep shadows that ringed the little clearing, but saw no sign of the cats. Later, perhaps, there would be the glowing reflections from their eyes, but he was sure that none would venture within the lighted area.

"Maybe you'd better go to sleep now," he suggested. "I'll keep the fire going."

"I'm not sleepy. I'd rather talk." She drew closer to Mark and, at the dictates of an uncomfortably acute conscience, he retreated.

"It seems to be a peculiarity of your sex," he commented. "But I still think you should sleep. You've had a hard day and tomorrow might be harder." Tonight, the Lord knew, apparently was going to be trying enough. His arms ached now with the will to hold them at his side.

"But so have you," she insisted. "You sleep and I'll watch. I read somewhere that it is the woman's duty to serve the man." Her smile was utterly childlike and completely irresistible.

"Huh," Mark said, very weakly. "Don't believe all you read, young lady. There have been some crackpot philosophers with peculiar ideas concerning human relations. One—possibly the one you read—believed that women should serve men like slaves. He spoke of his ideal man as a 'superior' man, who, it seems, was one who demanded much but gave little. Things don't work out that way, fortunately. His 'superior' man would have to be a cold, supercilious sort of a critter, and people just don't take to that kind of person, even women, who are known to be peculiar at times. Instead of serving, a woman would be more apt to hate him. People don't do things because they should do them; they do things because they *want* to. As soon as an act is considered a duty, people want to do the opposite." It didn't make much sense, Mark thought wildly, but when you talk you can't kiss. . . .

Nona thought it over for a minute. "Yes, I understand. But you see, I *want* to watch the fire for you."

Mark looked disgusted, and felt entirely helpless. Nona looked into his eyes with an expression that told him exactly

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where he stood, then seeing that he was scowling she appeared very contrite.

"Is that wrong?" she asked. "There is so much I must learn. Please tell me and don't be angry."

Mark promised to wake her when he got sleepy and let her take a turn at playing watchman. In spite of her scanty attire she insisted that she would not get cold, but Mark made her take his jacket for covering. The fire would keep him warm, although the night seemed to be mild enough to warrant no protection from the elements. He replenished the blaze and looked about for some visible evidence of the cats, whose wailing was making a constant cacophony in the almost motionless air. This time he saw a pair of glowing points, apparently suspended in mid-air, above the thick branch of a nearby tree. He snatched a burning brand from the fire and tossed it at the eyes. They disappeared amid a shower of sparks, to the accompaniment of a hideous spitting and hissing.

"And that takes care of you, my fuzzy friend," he remarked, retrieving the brand and tossing it back into the fire.

CHAPTER VIII

BLUEBLOOD

LATER, while occuying himself by hacking absently at a piece of wood with his clasp-knife, Mark was jolted by a startling discovery. An unexpected slip of the knife caused it to slice a thin sliver of flesh from his knuckle. The blade was so keen that he didn't immediately notice the slight wound, and continued whittling until startled by the sight of blood. Mark was not one to be awed, dismayed or even annoyed at the loss of a few drops of blood. But this time he was definitely alarmed when he noted the injury. For the blood was not red. It was blue!

Wiping a few drops from the cut with a finger he moved closer to the fire to be sure his eyes were not playing him false. The blood was blue, as deep blue as it had been red! There could be no doubt; no trick of reflected light was causing this phenomenon. Hastily he examined the wound from which it had oozed. He couldn't find it.

In that short time the wound had healed, and new skin covered the place where the old had been sliced off! He found the place, finally, but except for the fact that the new skin was a shade whiter than that surrounding it, there was no sign of the cut. Mark hadn't minded Omega's tricks; as a spectator he had even been olympically amused. But if his body was going to go gay on him—

Mark suddenly thought of the scratches he had suffered on the backs of both hands while helping Nona through the brambles. There was no sign of these either. He remembered thinking at the time that the pain incurred was of surprisingly short duration, whereas the scratches should have smarted for quite a while. He hadn't looked then because he hadn't wanted Nona to notice.

This discovery and the fact that for the first time he had time to think, started a train of thought that was to leave him even more puzzled. He remembered that after the initial surprise at his surroundings, his first physical sensation had been thirst. Not hunger; just thirst.

There had been no feeling of cold in spite of the fact that he had been nude. He had only donned clothes for reasons of modesty and to have a place to carry weapons. Further he remembered that when he washed in the water from the jug there had been no shock from the cold contact although he had doused himself thoroughly. He had felt the change in temperature, but not nearly so acutely as he used to before the long sleep.

Of course he had been so filled with wonder at the antics of Omega at the time, that he might not have been so sensible to sensation as normal. As an experiment he rolled up a sleeve and placed the end of a glowering brand within a few inches of his arm. There was plenty of heat, and the hair curled up, singed, but he felt no pain!

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Gritting his teeth he placed it in direct contact with the skin, then drew it quickly away. A grunt escaped his lips when the flesh seared for an agonizing instant.

But the pain left almost as quickly as it came, and the burned spot healed over without forming a blister. He brushed the charred portion and the dried skin flaked off to reveal an arm unmarked, save for the little charred circle of singed hair.

For a moment or two he just stared at his arm.

His thoughts went back over the events of the day.

He remembered the spear-prods given him by the cannibals marching him to their village. But the effected portion was so situated that he decided—with a glance toward Nona, who might wake up at any minute—to forego the inspection of that part.

Then, of course, there was hunger. He hadn't experienced any at all, though he had always been a heavy eater. He had eaten, all right, but only after the odors of Omega's dinner had made his mouth water. And that was more from habit than need, for he had only eaten a few mouthfuls.

Contemplation of it all made his head swim. The changed blood, with its bluish color, was no doubt the result of the anaesthetic given him before the operation. The anaesthetic had been injected, he recalled.

Of course, it might just be that his aristocratic ancestry was manifesting itself, he mused, with a grin at the dancing flames. He'd have to ask Omega about it. The peculiar blood was probably the cause of the other physical changes he had noted; the quick healing, the dulling of pain, the lessened—or perhaps non-existent—need for food, and . . .

Jumpin' Jehosophat! He suddenly realized that he should be dead tired by now. But he wasn't. He had no desire to sleep, at all. In spite of miles of walking, a fight, and enough excitement to last him a year, he felt no vestige of weariness. . . .

HE HAD just begun to feel elated at his new powers when this thought struck him. But he didn't feel so chipper when he contemplated the long nights ahead of him, during which he very much feared he would get fed up with his own company. On the other hand he had eaten, when he evidently didn't require food, so possibly he could sleep if he so desired. He almost awakened Nona in his anxiety to try out this theory, but the sight of her made him decide not to.

He bent over her and replaced the jacket which had shifted and partly uncovered her beautifully formed body. A leaping flame revealed a smile that gave her features a radiance that could only be surpassed, Mark was thinking, by the splendor of her luminous eyes.

Perversely he recalled thinking the same thing of another beautiful lady. But that one had been grossly sophisticated, shamefully mercenary. He had found that out almost too late; but he knew now that Nona was touchingly and oddly naïve.

Resuming his vigil at the fire, Mark's thoughts returned to the puzzle of his changed condition.

There must be some other answer to this queer lack of hunger. Maybe it was merely temporary loss of appetite, though one would think that he would lack energy if that were the case.

Any machine, human or otherwise, must be supplied with fuel or it ceases to function. Output can't be greater than input. And the energy he had put forth during the day far surpassed the amount of food-energy he had consumed. But then, there were machines equipped to store energy in advance for future consumption. The human machine had that ability.

But that couldn't apply to this instance. For two days prior to the appendix business he hadn't been able to eat because of the pains in his abdomen. That would be enough to weaken a man without having to undergo an operation.

And yet he had gone under the knife, lived without further nourishment for six

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thousand years, and then gone out and put in a strenuous day. And still felt no fatigue. Curiouser and curiouser.

He hoped Omega would know the answer.

CHAPTER IX

WHEN IS A BEAR . . .

WITH the morning's slow advance the weird wailings gradually lessened until they finally ceased. This particular breed of cats appeared to be entirely nocturnal in habit. A curious rabbit hopped into the clearing and inspected the girl's sleeping figure, ignoring Mark. This was an error on the bunny's part, for Mark declined to ignore him. A well-aimed stone put an end to the rodent's curiosity. Nona stirred and jumped to her feet as she realized that Mark had allowed her to sleep the night through.

"You broke your promise," she said, looking as pretty as two pictures.

"No, I didn't," he grinned. "I promised to wake you when I got sleepy. And I didn't get sleepy."

"But you must have. I was exhausted."

"But you forget I am a very unusual person," he reminded her. "Suppose you just rest over here while I get breakfast."

"But that isn't right," she protested. "I read that the custom in your day was for the woman to prepare the food for the man."

Mark sighed. "Yes, but do you know how to skin a rabbit and cook it over an open fire?"

"No," she admitted, ashamed.

"Well I do. So you just sit there and marvel. By the way, who does do the cooking in your city?"

"It's not my city!" she flared, then calmed down instantly. "The cooking is done by groups of men whose only duty is to prepare meals for the other workers. The city is divided into sectors, and in the center of each sector is a community building. At meal times long tables are set up.

"Men eat first, leave the building, and fifteen minutes later the women eat. The children are fed in a separate hall in the same building. These children's halls are attended by groups of women, although the food is prepared by the regular cooks. This community form of eating was adopted because of economy and also because it insured equality. It saves time, too."

"Also very clever on the part of the city fathers. The family dinner table offers too much opportunity for private discussion of affairs of state. And the men do all the cooking, eh?"

"Oh yes. I have heard that the women once did that work, but it was found that men could work together more efficiently and with less disagreement."

Mark chuckled. "Restaurant and hotel owners knew that thousands of years ago."

Nona was absorbedly watching the process of preparing the rabbit. Occasionally she would ask a question, but for the most part she was silent, missing not a movement of Mark's capable hands. And she could not have had a better tutor when it came to cooking game, for he had spent a good portion of his former existence on hunting and camping trips.

The rabbit was finally done to a turn and Mark dismembered it.

"Next time I'll be able to cook the meal," Nona said, between mouthfuls.

AN HOUR later found them resuming their journey southward. Neither had the slightest idea where they were going, for no plans for the future had been mentioned. Mark had given the matter some thought, but held his own council until he could get certains things straightened out in his mind.

For the present, he was aware, there was nothing he would rather be doing than strolling along with his delightful companion. And as long as she seemed to agree, the future was a nebulous thing, stretching out endlessly before them, not requiring any immediate thought.

But Mark's thoughts were not concerned with the future. He was still worried about Nona's calmly wanton behavior

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of the night before. There was the business of the bed of leaves; the fact that her people made no ceremony of marriage; the way she referred to the duties of a woman toward a man, as gleaned from the old books; and finally her general attitide that every thing was quite settled between them and to be taken for granted.

That was what puzzled him most, for he didn't remember having said anything that might have been construed as leading toward matrimony, although, he privately admitted, the thought had never been far from his mind since their first meeting.

But the very fact that she seemed to have the situation all cut and dried in her mind made him wary. And then, too, he might be assuming too much. You could get into trouble that way, he remembered.

"I would offer a penny for your thoughts if I knew what a penny was," Nona remarked.

"I wouldn't swindle you. But you can tell me something. Just what were you thinking immediately after Omega introduced us?"

Ecstasy illumined her face. "I was so bewildered that at first I couldn't understand. You see my studies had given me the impression that in your time it was customary for the man to—I can't think of the right words. Oh yes—to 'pay court' to the woman of his choice.

"I'm not sure just what that means, but it doesn't matter. That was probably from a book written before your era. So I didn't realize for a moment, that Omega was really introducing us. Of course, he told me afterward that he had watched over me since I was born, and that he knew more than the Eugenic Council. But I didn't know that when he introduced us. All I could think of was that you wanted me. Your grin told me that. I was so happy I couldn't think."

Mark leaned over, cupped her chin in his hand, and kissed her. Lingeringly. "A little formality I overlooked," he explained.

The whole thing was now clear. To Nona an introduction amounted to a giving in marriage. Here all the time he had been married to her—and without knowing it!

And what was even more astounding, she seemed to have been exceedingly happy about the situation from the first. All the while he had been afraid that he might be misinterpreting her actions. He suddenly frowned. The disturbing thought had to do with the conventional processes observed during his earlier days on the earth. Marriage was a matter to be performed by means of certain rituals.

Of course, this introduction affair was strictly regular in this day and age and evidently Nona considered it to be all that was required.

He stopped to analyze the process. In his day marriage was performed when a couple announced to the world, by answering questions put to them by a third person, that each took the other for a mate.

And in effect, this newer system amounted to practically the same thing. The witness is the person who does the introducing. And if the couple are satisfied with each other they announce it to the witness, and the world in general, by not demanding a substitute spouse. All very simple.

Well if Nona was satisfied, he was.

And now, it appeared, there were definite things which must be done. He was no longer a shiftless bachelor, but a settled married man. He would have to act like one and find a place to settle.

This general southerly direction that Omega had suggested should land them on the seacoast at a point several miles northeast of present-day New Haven. According to Nona there were no other seacoast settlements in this direction. Acting on this information he changed their course a bit to the eastward, in order that they reach the coast somewhere opposite the tip of Long Island. That should be a safe place to establish a home. All humans were apt to be enemies and therefore it was best to stay well clear of cities.

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THEY had covered several miles ignoring the passage of time when Mark noticed that the sun seemed to be near the zenith. Although he had eaten very little of the roasted rabbit, the pangs of hunger didn't appear. This phenomenon had ceased to intrigue him and in fact he had decided to eschew eating altogether, unless he should get hungry.

There was no use in going to the bother, as long as this new blood of his continued to rejuvenate itself. He realized that as time went on he would even cease to be stimulated by the sight or odors of food. And that was really no loss, for although in the past he had certainly enjoyed eating satisfying meals, it was obvious that if he hadn't needed the food he wouldn't have found any pleasure in eating it.

After the first few bites of the meal that Omega had furnished—those bites which hadn't tasted like garbage—the artificially stimulated appetite had left him. But for all that, he suddenly thought, Nona required food and it was up to him to procure some.

This might turn out to be quite an undertaking, he realized, for aside from the needle-gun he had only his axe for a weapon. Rabbits were plentiful, but a lucky throw like that one this morning couldn't always be duplicated.

They had sighted deer twice and an axe could be used to kill a deer, but the trouble was to induce the animal to come close and hold still while you performed the operation.

A bow and some arrows seemed to be indicated, except that even if he could construct a workable bow, it would take too long, and then he wouldn't know how to use it.

Thus gloomily meditating, Mark was startled by a thrashing in the nearby underbrush. The sound appeared to be coming toward them. Motioning Nona to be quiet he grasped the handle of his axe and crouched, ready to spring into action. This, he fervently hoped, would be a deer, and there would be darned little time in which to do the slaughter.

Sweat made the handle of the axe slippery but he was afraid to relinquish his grip for the instant needed to wipe it. The deer might appear during that instant. The threshing sound came nearer.

Abruptly the underbrush parted and out waddled the largest brown bear he had ever seen. Bear steaks were good to eat.

Mark moved lithely forward, axe poised for one killing blow. There might not be time for a second. Bears were not apt to cherish a person with bear steaks on his mind. But this particular specimen didn't seem to be unduly alarmed. He merely raised up on his hind legs and stood waiting while Mark advanced.

With a sudden shift to the left to dodge the outstretched paws, Mark swung a terrific blow. But the sharp movement of the axe caused the slippery handle to turn in his hand.

The intended shearing stroke which should have come close to decapitating the great beast, became a harmless thump with the broad side of the blade.

The bear grunted in surprise and fell down on all fours, his unexpected movement wrenching the axe out of Mark's grasp. The weapon fell to the ground while his rush carried Mark several feet past the bear. The monster seemed unaware that he could easily polish off this bold antagonist, for he ignored Mark for the moment to satisfy his curiosity concerning the axe.

AFTER a few sniffs he picked it up with his teeth and carried it to Mark. Dreamily, Mark accepted the axe, at which the bear reared up and stood still as if offering to continue the game. Mark looked helplessly at Nona, and stuffed the axe back in his belt.

"I'll have to find you something else to eat," he told her, eyeing the bear, who looked about as ferocious as his smaller cousin, the teddy. "You can't kill anything that wants to play, the way this fool brute does."

Nona, who had been watching with one hand muffling her mouth, gave a great sigh

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and sat weakly on the ground. Bears were an item completely outside her experience, and the encounter had unnerved her somewhat. Mark helped her to her feet and they resumed their trek. The bear, in a friendly manner, trotted along at their heels.

"I hope it doesn't occur to that critter just what I was trying to do," Mark said, looking nervously over his shoulder.

Nona's eyes widened. "Is he dangerous?"

"I don't think so, judging by the way he acted when I tried to kill him. But on the other hand, he could be. I wish I wasn't so tender-hearted. I couldn't have missed a second time. But he looked so darned agreeable . . . He thought it was all a game."

Nona was looking adoringly up at Mark's face, though doing so made her stumble, when both of them became aware that the breeze was carrying with it the tantalizing odor of fresh-cooked food.

Mark made a motion for quiet, and they advanced cautiously. No telling who might be responsible for the smell, but he had never heard of wild animals cooking their food, so it looked as if there might be humans in the offing. And humans were almost certain to be hostile.

But he was wrong this time. In a little clearing there was a table heaped with silver-covered dishes. It was only set for one, although there were three chairs. Omega was not in evidence but Mark suspected that he was there just the same.

"Well, the food problem seems to be solved for the present," he remarked. "Now if that pet poodle of ours doesn't decide to occupy the third chair . . ."

But as if his words put the idea into the bear's head, the shaggy beast bounded on ahead of them and made a clumsy attempt to sit down on one of the chairs. Not being designed to support such a weight, the chair promptly collapsed. But the bear, nothing daunted, squatted on his haunches, which brought him to the proper height anyway. Mark, at this point, began to suspect that all was not as it seemed.

"Pay no attention to the clown," he told Nona, holding her chair. "And if he lays a paw on anything you want, slap him one."

"But aren't you going to eat? There is only one plate."

Mark didn't answer, glaring at the bear, who was now looking very sullen, as if his feelings were hurt.

"He doesn't have to eat," the bear said, sulkily, in a high tenor voice.

"You might at least be a bass," Mark reproved.

"Did you ever hear a bear speak in a bass voice?"

"No. Never heard one speak at all."

"Well then, any kind of a voice I use is all right. And I'm getting sick and tired of your everlasting criticism. You're just jealous—that's all. Well, how've you been?"

"Okay. But you might have let me know you were marrying us. I didn't find it out until this morning. I must say I think it pretty inconsiderate. . . ."

CHAPTER X

I TOOK THIS WOMAN

A HEARTY guffaw shook the bear's sides. Nona, who had dropped her fork when the bear began to speak, sighed and resumed her meal. Things didn't happen according to any fixed pattern any more, and she was beginning to find a sort of naturalness in the unexpected. But she wished Omega would leave them alone. There seemed to be some connection between him and the unusual things she had noticed about her husband. His not eating or sleeping, for instance. And besides, when the two of them got to talking, she couldn't understand a word.

"Well," Omega was explaining, "I could see that you would be weeks getting around to it by yourself, so I thought I would help out. And both your minds were already made up on the subject, except that you didn't know it. So I speeded things up for a very good reason. You have probably noticed that you are changed somewhat?"

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"Yes. I meant to ask you about that."

"You have seen your blood?"

"Yes. It's blue. How come?"

"I'll explain. Keep your ears open, Nona. This concerns you, too. The cause of the change was the injection of the anaesthetic. The doctor concocted the thing mainly from a slightly radio-active compound which had been recently discovered. The resultant fluid resembled in some ways the liquid in which my brain was preserved, though differing in its effects. The anaesthetic action, of course, was only incidental. That really amounted to shock. The nervous system was numbed by the unaccustomed bombardment of radio-emanation, resulting in coma."

"But how is it that the guinea pig recovered consciousness, and I didn't? Was a different fluid used?"

"No. Same stuff. But the animal's greater vitality and coarser nerve sensitivity caused him to awaken after a few hours. You never would have woke up if I hadn't decided to help you. You would have lain there, half alive, for a few more thousand years, and then you would have died when the strength of the radio-active emanations decreased below a certain point. As it is you may live those years in full possession of your faculties."

Mark was stunned. This was something he was not prepared for. The implications involved evidently struck Nona a blow, for she let out a despairing wail.

"Then Mark will go on being a young man, while I grow old and ugly and . . ."

Omega raised a paw to silence her. "Nothing of the kind. That is what I was coming to. I think I told you that I have never made a practice of interfering with the life forms that I have found in my travels. Only on rare occasions I have helped promising civilizations when some catastrophe threatened them. But in this case I am making an exception. I have decided to create a new race of humans! And you two are to begin it.

"I expended a lot of thought before going ahead with it. The human race is a scurvy gang, as you probably know, with faults that far outnumber its virtues.

"Now don't look at me that way, Mark. If you will judge humans from an unbiased viewpoint, you must admit that they have hardly earned even the right to existence. Not speaking of individuals, mind you. There have been some noble and unselfish humans. But as a race they certainly deserve to be exterminated.

"They have repeatedly stamped out other life forms for no good reason; they have countless times reached high states of civilization, only to degenerate back to the beast. And all through human history travels the specter of cruelty, barbarism and senseless violence."

Mark was a bit miffed. "You're a little hard on us, aren't you? There is much to be said on the other side of the question."

"Not as a race, there isn't. But as individuals, something might be said for some of you. The only trouble is that your decent attributes usually become submerged. However, I suppose there's enough good in you to go on with. You two are to start a new life together, possessed of transmissible physical characteristics that should found a race capable of higher attainments than ever possible to ordinary humans. Oh yes, I am going to inject Nona to make her as you are. I'll do that now."

THE bear abruptly vanished and in its place was the patriarch they'd seen before. In his hand was a large hypodermic syringe.

"Whoa, Tillie," cried Mark. "I don't want her to go to sleep for six thousand years!"

"She won't. I'll strengthen her system to stand the shock."

The needle was inserted and its fluid pumped into the blood stream. Nona gave no sign that she felt anything. And, knowing Omega's powers, it is doubtful if she did.

"Now she has, or will have in a few hours, all the life vitality that has been yours since your awakening."

"What is the principal behind this change in blood?" inquired Mark.

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"Scientists back in your time were beginning to suspect that life was dependent on radio-activity. They spoke of life-charges which they called radiogens. Fundamentally they were on the right track. There had to be something besides the ordinary working chemistry of the body to explain the behavior of metabolism.

"The process might be summed up by saying that at birth a creature of protoplasm is endowed with a certain quantity of life-charges. The radio-activity of these charges is so slight as to be almost non-existent, but is nevertheless sufficient to support the life of the organism.

"As you know, radio-active materials are continuously breaking down into other elements. As this occurs the emanations decrease. Applying this to the organism you can see that as the radio-activity lessens, the vitality also lessens, metabolism slows down and the organism finally dies.

"In the case of your new blood, the radio-active element is much stronger and has a much longer half-period. The injection of the compound has changed your body chemistry considerably and given you certain physical properties which should ensure the survival of the new race.

"Food you will never need, because your blood always contains more energy than you can use in the everyday operation of your body. Ordinary injuries will scarcely pain, they will heal so quickly. And no disease germ can withstand the emanations of the compound.

"And while I think of it, you can heal germ diseases in others merely by bringing a portion of your body, your hands, for instance, into close proximity. The emanations extend a foot or so outside your body in sufficient strength to kill bacteria. You might be able to use that knowledge sometimes. Any questions?"

"Yes. I'm still wondering about the guinea pig. Why didn't the doctor notice these things in him?"

Omega chuckled. "He didn't get a chance. The animal only lived for a week after the injection. An overgrown tom-cat made a meal of him. The cat lived to a ripe old age, dying when about sixty, with the help of an Airedale."

Mark pondered for a minute. "You're sure these properties will be inherited?"

"Oh yes. It's not a matter of chromosomes, but life-charges, transmitted through the mother."

"Well then how does she get them to transmit? She has only a certain amount to start with."

"Look, son. I don't know everything. That's one of the things I'm not certain about. But I can tell you this: There is a race of beings, in another galaxy, who have your present form of life chemistry. They live for thousands of years and have similar reserves of vitality. And they transmit the quality to their offspring. Therefore you will.

"The difference, you must realize, is not one of body chemistry, although that is changed, but lies rather in the strength of the radio-active life-charges. Therefore if you can answer why ordinary humans can transmit their life-charges to their progeny, then you can answer the other question. I only know they do.

"A good theory is that your radiogens are being continually bolstered and augmented through absorption of the sub-cosmic energies which pervade space. That might explain why females of almost any species usually have greater vitality than males. Your insurance companies knew that women live longer than men and retain their vital powers later in life. Females must, therefore, be better equipped to absorb energy for the purpose of transmitting it to progeny.

"My knowledge of the thing might be compared with your knowledge of electricity. You know how to create it, use it and store it. You know all its properties, but you can't tell me what it is! As for me—I can create life, make it assume a number of forms, but for the life of me I can't tell you what enables the life-form to pass on the spark to its progeny. Absorption of energy is the only answer; but *how,* I don't know."

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MARK digested this, thoughtfully, and decided that it sounded logical. But after all, logical or not, the fact that he and Nona had these wonderful powers was more important than the why and wherefore of how they worked. "Well, now that you have started the ball rolling, have you any further plans for us?"

"No. Just live your lives as you wish or as you may. But just remember that you are not limited to three score years and ten. You have plenty of time. I think half of the world's evil can be laid at the doors of people who were willing to sacrifice others that they might cram two lifetimes into the short one alloted them. Your progeny will grow up with the heritage of a long life, and that, coupled with the finer mental characteristics with which you will endow them, should form the nucleus for a great race. Well, good luck. I'm leaving for the time being. By the way, can you speak Swedish?"

"No. What's that got to do with it?"

With a twinkle in his eyes, Omega quietly faded in the manner of the Cheshire cat. "You'd be surprised," came his quavering voice, as from a distance.

"Disconcertin' cuss," Mark complained. "Do you feel any different?"

Nona, who by this time was becoming accustomed to Omega's abrupt comings and goings, was looking at him with a speculative gleam in her eyes. "No," she stated. "But that is unimportant. I gathered from a remark you made that you were totally unaware what Omega meant when he introduced us. Is that right?"

Mark's jaw dropped. He hadn't credited her with such perspicacity. "Yes," he finally admitted, "I didn't know then."

"That's what I thought. But what I want to know is: Did you really want this to happen?"

"You mean for us to be married? Sure I did! But I didn't know how you felt. So I owe Omega a whole lot for settling the thing."

Nona's face brightened. "Then I was right about the 'paying court' that the old books told of."

"Oh yes. It was quite the thing in those days. One of the most popular all-around sports."

"And didn't the men tell the women how much they loved them?"

"Yes indeed. Although that came toward the end."

"Then you should tell me. Especially since we are already married."

"Of course, Nona." His voice grew solemn in spite of himself. "I love you with all my heart. I thought you knew that."

"I wanted to hear it. And maybe you had better kiss me. I don't want to have to do all the wooing."

CHAPTER XI

THE MAN FROM OSLO

IN THE year 7966 forests covered most of the area which had once comprised the New England states. Thus it was that when Mark and Nona finally broke out of the woods' dark corridors they found themselves on a narrow strip of rocky beach facing the Atlantic Ocean.

For some time before the water was sighted they had heard the thundering of the breakers and felt the change in the air. But when the sea itself met their vision neither could speak for a moment.

After the disappearance of Omega, they had debated the question of the immediate future at some length. And now, in the late afternoon, the only decision they had come to was that they would establish a camp somewhere near the shore.

Later, Mark contended, it would be wise to seek a more southerly spot for the winter.

It was out of the question to return to the tomb for more supplies. Even granting he could find it, there was the ever-present possibility that they would be recaptured by the wandering savages. And that was too great a risk, now that he had Nona to consider. But the whole matter was shortly taken out of his hands, so he might as well not have worried.

A mile or so to the north was a rocky

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prominence jutting out almost to the water's edge. From that distance details could not be made out clearly, but it seemed to Mark that the lower fifteen feet of the cliff was in deep shadow. That might indicate that this lower portion was of soft rock which had been worn away some time in the past by the action of water, and now formed a recess sheltered by the overhanging cliff. It was well worth investigating, and they set out in its direction.

The forest receded as they approached the prominence, leaving a fairly wide beach. The cliff was indented deeply around the bottom. Mark didn't have time to notice any more because he saw something a lot more interesting. Emerging from the woods at a point skirting the cliff was a large body of decidedly odd-looking men. Mark gaped, rubbed his eyes until they stung and gaped again. But the men didn't disappear. And unless all the pictures in all the history books he'd ever seen were lying, the men were full-blown Vikings.

Big, rawboned, yellow-bearded bucks they were, with leather trappings, and most of them even bigger and heavier muscled than he. Their weapons seemed to consist of the short-sword and double-bitted battle-axe.

As yet the band had not sighted them and Mark bustled Nona toward the nearest fringe of forest. There would be a chance of eluding them once within the darkening wood, but they would surely be overwhelmed if they were caught out on the open beach.

Dusk was falling fast and it appeared for a moment as if they would not be discovered. The direction from which the Norsemen were approaching would make it impossible to escape if the band chose to intercept their flight. But still Mark was afraid to break into a run for the reason that a swiftly moving body is far more apt to be seen out of the corner of the eye than a slow-moving one. So they proceeded at a walk, in a direction at right-angles to the nearing band of men, each step bringing them closer to the safety of the forest.

BUT just about this time a particularly nasty Fate decided to insert a skinny finger and stir the brew. One of the nearer Norsemen glanced away from his course skirting the cliff and saw them. A sudden shout announced that they were discovered.

"Run for it!" he cried.

But he knew as he sped across the sifting sand, matching his pace with Nona's, that the Vikings had far less space to travel in order to cut them off. The race was lost before it was begun.

There was one last chance, however. "Nona! Cut across to the left. I'll engage them for a minute, and then catch up to you."

"No! They'll kill you!"

"I can run faster than you," he explained. "I'll only need to stop them for a minute, and then I'll break away and catch up to you. Do as I say!"

Nona reluctantly obeyed. But the maneuver was spotted by the Norsemen, for two men detached themselves from the band and galloped off to catch the girl before she could reach the forest. Mark gave a groan and caught up to her. It was better to be together if this was to be the end.

And then too, if the Norsemen were in one body he could put more of them out of commission with the needle-gun, before the remainder could cut loose with their swords and axes. He only hoped that the gun would throw needles with sufficient strength to penetrate their leather trappings.

Instructing Nona to make a sudden bolt for the forest when the marauders drew near, Mark slowed his pace and loosened his axe in its holster. The needle-gun he held in readiness.

In another second they would be in range. Aiming carefully at a level with their faces he released the trigger. The gun vibrated with a humming sound and one of the attackers went down. Three more had fallen when the throbbing of the gun

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abruptly ceased. The magazine was empty!

Mark wiped the palm of his right hand, on his jacket—remembering the bear—and drew the axe, silently cursing himself for neglecting to reload the gun. There was no time now, for he was not at all familiar with the workings of its mechanism.

The Fates must have been chuckling, for as Nona obeyed his command to turn and run again toward the forest, she slipped on the treacherous sand and was immediately grabbed up by a burly golden-haired giant.

The Viking had his hands full, for the now tireless girl fought like a wildcat, squirming and scratching and biting.

But Mark saw none of this, for he was quite busy himself. There were about twenty-six of the rovers, and he was certain he was going to cut this number down considerably before they finally got him. The first to meet him was a bearded giant, fleeter of foot than his companions, for he was several feet in advance.

With a tigerish spring, Mark sunk his axe through the fellow's steel helmet and snatched the short-sword out of his lifeless hand. A wrench tore the axe loose while the sword in his left hand fended off a blow from the next one.

In two heart-beats he was dispatched in a like manner. But now the rest of Mark's attackers had come up and were methodically surrounding him. The cuts he was receiving caused not the slightest pain for they healed as fast as they came.

Time after time the Vikings were about to cut him down from the sides and rear, but his flashing sword and shearing axe saved him.

BUT the inevitable finally happened. A sword blow, delivered from behind, gave his skull a terrific thump. There was a bright flash, a feeling of falling, and then darkness. He was unconscious for only a few minutes, but when he awoke he was trussed up so securely that he could hardly move. A twist of his head revealed that Nona was similarly bound. She didn't look very frightened. Just mad. Mark grinned.

The Norsemen—the ones who weren't dead or sitting on the ground nursing their wounds—were arguing apparently about Mark's stainless-steel axe, held gingerly by a blond Viking who seemed to be their chief.

Their guttural speech was totally unfamiliar to Mark, and the occasional awed glance in his direction from one or another of his captors made even less sense.

After a minute, the chief bent over to examine Mark's wounds. There weren't any. Not even scars. Another discussion arose over this, but it sounded like so much Swedish to Mark. Swedish! That blamed Omega again! He had foreseen that Mark would run afoul of these rovers. And he had evidently known that they would not be killed, but merely taken prisoners.

Finally the Norsemen seemed to have come to some sort of conclusion, for the chief approached and spoke in a respectful tone of voice and motioned for Mark and Nona to rise.

There was a great confusion for a few minutes as the survivors made provision to carry their fallen comrades. Mark noticed with approval that the dead were to be taken along as well as the wounded. This placed his conquerors on a definitely higher plane than his former captors, who had left the dead behind, and killed the wounded rather than be encumbered with them. He suddenly chuckled at the thought that these men were in for a great surprise. Four of the corpses were due to come to life when the effects of the drugged needles wore off.

The presence of Norsemen, fantastic as it might be, meant that there must be a ship somewhere in the vicinity. Yet there was none in sight. The question was answered in short order when the chief led the way around the seaward side of the cliff. There, standing well off from the shore was a long, low-slung, single-masted ship, barely visible in the fast-fading twilight.

Evidently the shallow slope of the shore had prevented closer approach, for the boat

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lay just outside the whitecaps, rising and falling with each rolling wave.

Without any hesitation the Norsemen plunged into the sea, herding Mark and Nona along. Four of the leather-clad giants took it upon themselves to assist the captives, as the water deepened and it became increasingly difficult to maintain balance without the use of their arms.

The two who aided Mark were frankly curious and took this opportunity to squeeze his biceps and test the hardness of his abdominal muscles. In fact so attentive were this pair, that, slightly alarmed, Mark twisted around to see if Nona was being similarly treated.

In the main, the ship was a typical Viking raiding-vessel. High-prowed, and equally high in the stern, its sleek lines were marred by the long row of out-jutting oars. These were out-rigged to provide a maximum leverage.

The sail, now furled, was a departure from the traditional Viking style. Its yards and halyards were of an improved rig, and, Mark guessed, far more manageable than the older type.

As the wading party advanced several more details showed variance with his recollection of Norse ships. Although his knowledge might have been gleaned from unreliable sources, Mark was sure, for one thing, that Viking vessels were not nearly so large as this one appeared to be. But these were not Vikings of the tenth century. Of the same general racial stock and possibly a similar state of culture, they must have retained some of the knowledge that was theirs before the series of wars that wrecked civilization throughout the world.

WILLING hands hauled them aboard. The captives were allowed to stand at the base of the thick mast while the chief disappeared into a cabin in the fore part of the ship. A guttural chattering was going on between those who had remained on board and the landing party. Several times Mark noticed curious stares in his direction and twice as often in Nona's. Her scanty clothing, soaking wet, probably accounted for this. He scowled helplessly.

"What will they do with us?" queried Nona.

Mark looked at her with pride. Her face showed only the calm, unruffled placidity that was her natural expression.

"It's hard to say," he agreed. "But for the present there's no need to worry. The sight of my blue blood, and the way my wounds healed has got them buffaloed. And then too, we both fought like wildcats and if these apes are anything like their ancestors, they have a great admiration and respect for physical valor. Keep your chin up. We'll come out on top."

His words were a lot more cheerful than his thoughts. His recollection of Viking history was far from reassuring. The old Norsemen, as far as he could remember, were not given to going about shedding sweetness and light. They had at one time, in fact, forced the king of France to hand over a large portion of his land. They had raided Paris on several occasions. Very tough people.

The chief reappeared, barking orders. The oars were manned and the big square-sail unfurled. An offshore breeze soon had the craft scudding out to sea, and the oars were no longer needed.

As soon as the ship was well under way, and there was no longer any need for his supervision, the chief addressed Mark with a series of unintelligible gutturals. Then realizing that he was not understood, he beckoned and led the way back to the cabin. To the prisoners' surprise, its interior was as barbarically luxurious as a sultan's seraglio.

On a cushioned divan reclined a raw-boned giant with a flowing white beard and a decidedly emaciated appearance. This ancient had the look of one who was suffering from, or just recovering from, a wasting illness.

By the deferential attitude of the chief Mark wrongly deduced that this old one was the captain of the ship and the other was second in command, acting-chief dur-

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ing his commander's illness. The yellow-haired one gave a stiff bow and made a sort of salute with his right hand and with the same motion waved it toward the captives, as if presenting them.

He then stepped back and effaced himself while the ancient calmly inspected the two prisoners. While so doing, the decrepit old fellow propped himself up on one elbow, and then, after a long minute, sat erect. The look of astonishment on the other Viking's face gave Mark reason to believe that the old fellow hadn't sat up for many a day. He was evidently recovering, then, though just what effect that might have on Nona's and his welfare he had no way of telling.

"Your knife, Sven, son of Sven," quavered the ancient, finally, holding out his hands. The words, of course, were Swedish but their meaning was made clear when the chief produced the knife.

Mark wondered what was coming, but stood quietly waiting, as did Nona. There was nothing they could do, even if the ancient should decide to slide the weapon between their ribs. Mark wondered if his new healing powers would stand up under that kind of punishment. He was afraid not.

But the oldster didn't seem to have anything like that in mind, for with a great creaking of stiffened joints, he rose to his feet and started hacking away at the wet bonds which were cutting into Mark's wrists.

The yellow-haired chief looked on wide-eyed, but made no attempt to interfere. The old man seemed to be quite a guy, Mark decided, for he remembered that Vikings were not inclined to be respectful to anybody who couldn't command their respect.

But then these weren't really Vikings. He mustn't be deceived too much by appearances. They might turn out to be very nice, once he got to know them. Even quite gay characters. The business of the sudden attack on shore didn't necessarily mean anything. It seemed to be the order of the day to attack or avoid strangers.

He would have to adjust his mind to life in this new world, where only primitive reactions were to be expected. In this age it paid to look on every stranger as an enemy until he proved he wasn't.

THE bonds parted and Mark flexed his muscles. He was surprised to see that the ancient was holding the knife for him to take.

The chief was equally surprised and this time could not hold his peace. "Don't!" he cried, and moved forward to interfere. "He will kill you!"

But the graybeard waved him aside. "Know you, Sven," he admonished, "that this one is the chosen of Thor, the master of thunder. He is an earthly representative of the Hammer-thrower. Have you not seen proof enough? His influence has already cured my affliction. Observe!"

The ancient squatted and sprang erect several times in quick succession, at the same time flinging his arms wildly about. Not understanding the reason for these calesthenics, the captives wondered vaguely if the oldster wasn't probably a shade unhinged, but Yellow-hair was impressed.

"I bow to your superior knowledge, O Wise One," he said, and did.

Mark, at this point, quickly took the proffered knife before the old fellow could go into his dance again. In an instant Nona was likewise free. Mark returned the knife to the dumbfounded chief.

"I don't know what it's all about," Mark informed Nona, "but it looks as if the danger is over. The old gent seems friendly."

The ancient was looking at the chief triumphantly, having proved his point. "I shall now," he proclaimed, "speak with the strangers in the language of the Asa, the Gods, which they understand."

Then turning to the prisoners he said: "Ay tank everything bane okay now. Ay tank ve go home."

Mark looked at Nona and Nona looked at Mark. Then they both looked at the ancient. Mark groaned. "Omega! I might have known."

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The ancient turned to the chief, Sven, son of Sven, as if pleased with Mark's words. "The chosen of Thor tells me that he forgives you for attacking him and his mate," he said. "And furthermore that the Valkyrs will bear those that he was forced to kill to their eternal glory in Valhalla. You may tell this to our men. And distribute meade that all may rejoice in the good fortune that is ours in having such guests. Now go and leave us alone."

Sven, with a stiff bow which shook his long hair into his eyes, left the cabin. The ancient grinned impishly, and addressed the captives. "You vars speaking of Omega? Ay nefer bane heard of him."

Mark eyed him askance, far from convinced. When unusual things happened, Omega was very apt to be within haling distance. "I hate to dispute my elders," he mused, aloud. "But that's very corny Svenska you're handing out. Quit playing, will you?"

"Whippersnapper!" raged the spurious Swede. "Can't I have any fun? You'll talk back to the wrong guy some day, and he'll spill some of your aristocratic hemoglobin. Scoffer!"

Still muttering the old man let his aged body creakily down on the cushioned divan. "I ought to do something for this old duffer," the quavering voice resumed, in quieter tones. "After all, he's allowing me the use of his body, even if he does think I am the spirit of Odin." The body stretched and started to fill out before their eyes. Some of the gauntness seemed to leave the face, but it still remained the face of an old man. "Mustn't go too far or they won't recognize him. But this should give him forty years more and he was dying when I took charge."

CHAPTER XII

WHOM THE GODS HAVE CHOSEN

MARK pulled Nona down on an upholstered bench beside him. "Of course this is none of my business, but would you mind clearing away some of the fog? Don't put yourself out, mind you."

Omega sat up, chuckling. "I get a kick out of watching you two. Not that I sicced these latter-day Vikings on you. I admit I knew you would run into them if you went in the direction I sent you. If I had advised any other course, you would have fared a lot worse.

"Matter of fact I couldn't have prevented that fight by any normal means, but I did save you from having your head sliced off on two occasions. That was one of the reasons that those men were so in awe of you. The two men who swung those blows swore that their axes struck a wall in front of your neck. And that is what started them noticing that, although they had cut you up a good bit, the wounds had healed. After that they were willing to believe anything."

"Thanks. But here we are, in the middle of the ocean headed for Iceland, or some such place. What's the idea? A bit of a warning, since you were watching us anyway, and we might have avoided all this."

"What's the difference? What was formerly your country is now just so much territory overrun by savage tribes, here and there dotted with cities in a more or less feudal state. There is no more civilization there than there is anywhere else in the world.

"These Vikings are just as advanced as any race on the face of the Earth. And as far as social relations are concerned, they come closer to the old American traditions than any of the other races. They value personal independence highly, and look with suspicion on anyone who tries to govern them with an iron hand. They work together under a leader only when that leader has proven himself capable. No fourflusher can make them follow like a bunch of sheep.

"Taking it all in all they're not such a benighted race, even if they do like a spot of pillage once in a while. That comes mainly under the head of exuberant animal spirits. They're not essentially cruel."

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"That may be true, but now we'll have to learn a new language, and be governed according to the customs of these people, or else leave them and make a home for ourselves in some totally unfamiliar land."

"Use your head, son. After six thousand years, don't you think the topography of the land is changed as well as the people? America is not as you left it. There are mountains where you knew valleys; lakes where there was land. For instance, you struck a path today aimed to bring you to the seashore about opposite the tip of Long Island. It didn't, for the place no longer exists. Long Island gradually sank until now it is below sea level. It was gone for years before anyone noticed."

"And as far as customs are concerned, you certainly wouldn't want to live out your lives as complete hermits. You'd have to conform to the customs of some race. And among these people you will be big-shots. Chosen of the gods! I fixed that for you. You'll have to prove it every so often, for these lads don't take much on hearsay, but you can do that easily."

Mark looked at Nona, who was keeping a discreet silence. She seemed perfectly happy just to sit beside him and listen.

"I don't want to give the impression of seeming ungrateful," Mark said. "We both appreciate the things you have done—barring the practical jokes—but I don't fancy this business of sailing under false colors. Chosen of the gods!"

"I EXPECTED you to pull that. Now listen . . . If I had given any other explanation for your physical peculiarities, they might not even have let you live. And if they had, you could never have associated with them on an even footing. You would have been a pariah, something not altogether to be trusted. An Elk at a Shriner's clambake . . .

"On the other hand, if you are considered a sort of demigod blessed by their most respected deity, Thor, they will envy and respect you, but nevertheless treat you as one of them. It's the type of thing they would fall for, too. They believe their gods are very close to them and interested in their slightest actions. Every exploit of theirs succeeds or fails only because the god interested approves or disapproves.

"And think of Nona. Her chances of safety are improved immensely."

Mark made a helpless gesture.

"I shouldn't have started this discussion in the first place," he growled. "There seems to be nothing to do but begin taking lessons in Swedish."

"It's not exactly Swedish. It's a conglomeration of three or four languages—Swedish, Norwegian, Danish and several dialects—all of them changed considerably by the passage of time. But I'll spare you the mental effort of learning it."

He arose, placed a hand on Mark's head and stared into his eyes.

For the first time it was driven home to Mark the terrific mind-energy that was Omega's. The impact of irresistible thought-waves made his brain reel. It seemed as if a hammer was beating repeatedly—throbbingly—inside his skull. His senses were dimming and he had almost lapsed into unconsciousnes when Omega quit and moved over to Nona. Mark shook his head several times, trying to clear it and gain sufficient possession of his faculties to stop Omega from subjecting Nona to the torture he had just endured. But the operation was completed before he could speak.

"Calm yourself," said the ancient, in the Viking language, which Mark realized he could now understand as well as English. "I deadened her brain before I forced the change in her memory cells. She felt no pain. I'd have done the same for you except that you needed taking down a peg or two."

"I'm chastened. But the next time I'll learn languages in the ordinary manner."

"I'll have to explain to Sven that your keenness of mind—a gift conferred by Thor—enabled me to teach you the tongue in short order." Omega chuckled. "Now suppose you two adjourn to the next room until daylight. I have some thinking to do."

TO BE CONCLUDED NEXT WEEK

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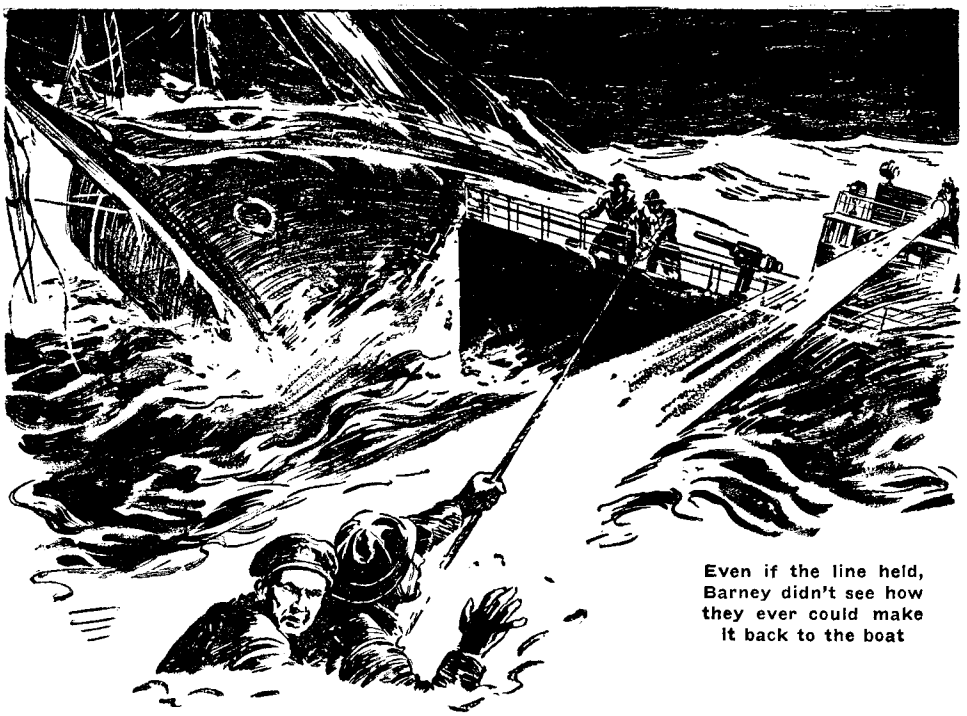

Even if the line held, Barney didn't see how they ever could make it back to the boat

Semper Paratus

It's an old Coast Guard motto, and it means: "Always Be Ready." When Barney, that sheep-brained young mountaineer joined the service, he didn't realize the sort of things you were always supposed to be ready for

By LESLIE T. WHITE

SOME guys, because of a dame, join the Foreign Legion; others commit suicide, or become wanderers on the face of the earth. Barney enlisted in the Coast Guard. But now as he sweated over the gleaming brass of the one-pounder on the foredeck—the same one-pounder he had so religiously polished only yesterday and the day before that, and all the days before that during his five months of service—he began to feel that no dame on earth was worth it.

Two girls suddenly materialized on the edge of the dock, and Barney knew what they meant; it meant that McCrady was coming, Barney reflected bitterly. That was just one of the things he had against McCrady. He uncorked his six-feet-two of loose-jointed awkwardness, gathered up his rags and the can of muck the supply-depot insisted was brass polish, and moved around to the starboard side of the gun to escape McCrady's ice-gray eyes.

McCrady wasn't a captain; he was only a Chief Bosun's Mate, but he was the All-highest on the seventy-five-foot patrol boat *CG-803,* which did not rate a commissioned officer.

He was a tough disciplinarian—and tough generally. But even worse, as far as Barney was concerned—he was small and dapper and handsome. In the hill country back in Kentucky where Barney hailed

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from they didn't favor men who were small and dapper, and Barney saw nothing about McCrady to make him change his opinion.

A passing oyster-barge rolled up a light swell that put old *CG-803* to nuzzling her gray topsides against the dock pilings like a fawning dog; but Chief Bosun's Mate McCrady never altered his jaunty stride.

His white cap and double-breasted blue jacket were immaculate. He dazzled the two girls with a quick smile and a snappy salute as he hopped nimbly down to the deck—and put his foot squarely on the mop which lurked in the shadow of the wheelhouse.

The mop started down the deck like a cat with its tail trod on. McCrady went into a spin like a weary top's, until his heels hit the weatherboard and he ricocheted backward into the wheelhouse and landed hard on his seat.

The girls giggled. Barney guffawed, although he was sorry McCrady hadn't followed his cap which had rolled overboard. The Chief bounded to his feet and eyed the offending mop while Oleson, the engineer, grappled for the cap with a boathook. When the cap was retrieved, McCrady shook the water from it, slanted it over one eye at an aggressive angle, and picked up the mop.

Barney stopped smiling.

"Twist her tail!" McCrady snapped at Oleson, and as the big Swede ducked below to get his engines going, McCrady started forward. Barney found a tarnished spot under the shoulder-piece of the gun and concentrated on that.

"Hey, you! Boot!" barked McCrady.

BARNEY inched his nose a little closer to the gun and kept on rubbing. He knew the chief was addressing him, for *Boot* was the name that had always been given to brand-new enlisted men since the ancient days of the service when future seamen were taught their way around ships by the well-directed toe of a boot. But those days, Barney trusted, were gone forever. He was wrong. McCrady planted a fast one where it belonged and Barney straightened smartly. The girls giggled again. So did Leary, the cook, and Disher, Oleson's assistant.

"Ow!" yelped Barney. "You cain't kick me!"

"Pipe down!" grated the chief in a voice like a blow-torch. "You left this swab right on deck."

"I was just usin' it."

McCrady controlled himself by sheer force of will. "You been told before about putting things away when you're done using them. Can't you get it through your thick skull this boat has to be ready to roll at all times? Here." He abruptly pushed the soggy mop in Barney's face.

Barney had opened his mouth when the mop changed his mind, so he was spitting desperately when the big engines roared alive below.

"Stand by to cast off," McCrady snapped at him. "And for once in your life, do something right." With that parting shot, he stalked aft.

Joe Bunch, McCrady's mate, did not laugh. From the shelter of the wheelhouse he contemplated the incident with a sad eye.

He liked the lanky lad from Kentucky, but he sincerely wished the boy had stayed in the mountains and become a moonshiner, or done whatever inlanders did. Joe wouldn't know about that because, like McCrady, he had spent all his forty years of life either on the sea, or within sound of it. All the Bunches and all the McCradys had been seamen.

Joe couldn't understand people who didn't love the sea, but if they didn't, he couldn't understand why they enlisted in the Coast Guard, for that service absorbed more salt water than even the navy.

He knew Barney had enlisted, not because he loved the sea, but because he loved a dame. That was Barney's business, Joe admitted gloomily; but Joe's business was to keep the organization of the seventy-five-foot patrolboat in perfect coordination. So when McCrady stormed into the wheelhouse, Joe said:

"Look, Mac, why don't you get rid of

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Barney? Have him transferred to one of the cutters or something on shore."

McCrady was steeled with Maine stubbornness. "I picked that lemon and I'll keep him."

Joe Bunch sighed. He knew only too well McCrady's pride in his ability to pick good prospects out of the new enlistment lineups. The Chief insisted he could pick a man and then make a seaman out of him who would do ample credit to the service. Joe had been along the day McCrady first saw the gawky kid fresh from the mountains. Barney had a dead-pan face, short brown curls that screwed close to his skull, and rangy muscles.

McCrady had said, aside to Joe: "He'll do—you watch," and he had chosen Barney.

Neither of them had known then, of course, that Barney was inflicting a sort of willing martyrdom on himself because his girl had trotted off with a drummer. When a guy enlists for a three years' stretch he usually plans to stick it out for six years and then get the white ticket that will give him a permanent future in the service. But not Barney. He had never seen more water than a small river, and he did not want to see any more.

"Look, Mac," Joe argued mildly. "You're entitled to one mistake in twenty years. That kid just hasn't got it in him. He's not going after his white ticket; he'll quit right after his first enlistment. Transfer him an' get some guy that's been around the sea."

"If he leaves this boat," the Chief said stubbornly, "he'll go over my head for his transfer. I won't admit I could make such a bonehead error. He stays, an' I'll either kill him or cure him." He stuck his head out the open window and signaled for the docklines to be cast off.

JOE watched Barney fumble with the lines. It was hopeless, he knew. Perhaps the kid could do it if he wanted to, if he got the spirit of the service. But you can't put that into a man. Joe waited until McCrady backed the patrol boat into the channel and got on the course, then he played his ace card.

"It's not only Barney hates the sea an' the service, Mac; he don't get along with the boys."

McCrady turned his pale eyes on his mate. When McCrady got that glint in his eyes, they reminded Joe Bunch of the peculiar color of gun-steel where the bluing has rubbed off.

"What's that?" barged the chief. The one thing he insisted on was teamwork; it was a religion with him. He didn't mind taking an undermanned boat into any sort of weather, just so long as each of the crew did his part and worked in harmony with the others. It took harmony and teamwork to do the kind of work they had to do; teamwork and headwork.

"Well, it isn't entirely the kid's fault," the mate explained. "He's not used to livin' close with other people. Anyhow them mountaineers are always feudin' with somebody. Like his quarrel with the cook. Leary took a correspondence course in muscle-buildin' from some school. He's got his diploma, too. But Barney's takin' a mail course from another school, and he got crossed up with Leary. The cook says Barney insulted his alma mater."

McCrady rang for an extra notch of power and slammed past a channel buoy closer than he ordinarily did. He spoke slowly. "Quell that kid, Joe, if you have to kill him. He's goin' to make a sailor, or . . ."

Joe had played his card, and lost. Later he tried to talk a little sense into Barney. "Look, what's wrong with you? Did you leave that swab underfoot on purpose?"

The lad from Kentucky wagged his head. "No, suh, I did not. I was haulin' water out of the ocean with a bucket an' swabbin' down them decks with the mop. Why don't that . . ."

"Easy," warned Joe, "he's your superior."

". . . anyhow, why don't he look where he's goin'?"

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Joe Bunch took a deep breath of good salt air. "Look, Barney, listen close to these few, simple words. Try to understand them. This is the United States Coast Guard, not the mountains. There has to be a place for everything because you can't ever tell when something—"

"I read that in the manual. Sounds like school."

"It's a tradition of the sea, Barney."

"I hate the sea."

"Look—why don't you apply for a transfer? Maybe you could get on one of the big three-stackers," suggested Joe.

"No use. It'd just be another darned boat."

"You should have been a forest ranger."

Barney missed the sarcasm. "Don't I know it! But I'll stick out this one enlistment."

Joe was reluctant to admit defeat. "Look now. Maybe if you put in a request you could get transferred to yeoman duty ashore—you know, office work. Then you wouldn't be around guys like Leary."

"I'm not afraid of that cook. Some day I'll bop—"

"I know, I know, but it would be more pleasant."

"I don't expect it to be pleasant," grumbled Barney sadly. "I'm stickin'. McCrady cain't break—"

"Okay, okay." Joe Bunch's voice took on an edge. "Only you're goin' to obey orders as long as you're around here. You're goin' to work with the boys if I got to pin your ears back myself. An' keep things where they belong, understand? This boat is always ready." Just then McCrady rang for him, so he hurried up to the bridge.

They pulled a small yawl off a sandbar, and saw it on its way. The skipper of the yacht gave them a careless wave and that was all.

"Not even a thank you," sneered Barney. "Mugs who love the sea! Nuts!"

IT WASN'T that he didn't try to get along; he did, in his fashion. He did it like a convict doing his stretch, looking to the day of his release. Only for Barney, his sentence could not be shortened by good behavior. He was a steady workman, but he liked to be doing something sensible, not just polishing brass over and over, week in and week out, even when there was nobody around to look at it. And sougeeing paint work until his fingers bled.

Why, back in his hometown the folks figured it was something swell to paint a house *once* when it was first built. Certainly nobody ever heard of scrubbing what had already been painted.

All this useless work was bad enough, but what Barney just could not assimilate was the necessity for all the rituals of the sea; nonsense such as putting every little rag and rope exactly where it was before, as if it was being arranged for a blind man to find.

He figured out that nearly twenty percent of his time was spent in putting something away, then going and getting it out again a few minutes later. He couldn't see that.

On the farm where Barney was raised, when you heard the dinner bell clang you didn't take the plow apart, polish and oil each piece, and hang it in a leather case some place: no, suh, you let go the plow handles right where she was, and ran for the table.

That's where he got balled up with McCrady, like leaving the mop right where he'd dropped it when dinner was piped. If you didn't duck when Leary announced chow, you got left. Not that you'd miss much either, Barney ruminated. Leary's coffee—affectionately known as mud—was corrosive, and his dessert specialty, tapioca pudding, known as snake-eyes, reminded Barney of a saucer of buckshot.

But the gnawing ache always centered in Barney's stomach was not put there by Leary's cooking. It was fear did that.

In his five months of service, he had seen no rough weather—not what Bunch and the Chief called rough—but Barney knew it was coming.

It always came with the Fall.

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Seas that crushed big ships and let men and débris trickle to the depths; winds that screamed like madmen and tore out the masts; skies so black they smothered lights. No tropical hurricane blew harder than the storms of Barney's imagination.

He watched a casual swell raise a giant liner, and multiplied that force in his mind. Someday he would have to go out in a storm like that, and when he visualized it, his stomach knotted, and refused to digest Leary's snake-eyes.

For a whole week after Bunch's lecture, Barney kept out of trouble and Joe began to pride himself as a mediator and a handler of men.

True, Leary took offense one night at a slanderous criticism Barney made of Leary's teacher's method of thickening the neck muscles—Barney insisted what the method thickened was six inches *above* the neck—but Oleson and Disher separated the students before anybody was hurt.

Joe Bunch was glad because now it was getting along toward October and a bang-up line storm was due about this time of the year. Most of the yachtsmen were hauling out, but there was always the fishing fleet to worry about, and it took mighty smooth teamwork to handle a big trawler in a north Atlantic gale.

SATURDAY the wind started to build up from the southeast. The barometer went down and the sky became slate-colored and sullen. Little clouds in huddled bunches fled before the wind and disappeared shoreward.

Watching them Barney felt his stomach sag and he wished he was aboard one of them, for at the rate they were heading they would pass mighty close to his beloved hills in Kentucky. Barney couldn't read a barometer, but he could read Joe Bunch's worried expression.

He felt sick.

On Sunday the wind began to haul around to the northeast. The sea, even here in the harbor, became restless, like a champing stallion. *803* stood stiff against her dock lines, and McCrady ordered extra springlines secured. Then, leaving orders to be called if anything happened, he went home.

Joe Bunch hung out storm pennants to warn small craft, and haunted the radio. Barney trailed after him doglike, mute and worried. Finally Joe snapped at him:

"Quit followin' me around. Do something! Swab down those decks!"

Barney fished out the big galvanized pail and the mop and went forward. He didn't go right up into the bow because *803* had developed an ominous roll. He tied an extra-strong, extra-long length of rope on to the handle of the pail and heaved it overboard, clinging to the lifelines with one hand and trying to raise the bucket of sea water with the other.

One hand for the ship, the other for yourself, was the old slogan, but the bucket seemed to require two hands, and Barney felt the same way about himself. He looked around to see if Oleson or one of the boys was in sight to help him, and when no one was available, Barney took a couple of turns with his end of the rope around a stanchion, then tied a knot.

Leaving the heavy pail hanging overside, he started aft to get Disher. Just then Leary announced chow, so Barney trailed down to the galley with the others.

They were halfway through the meal when they heard McCrady's feet hit the deck, and a moment later his voice rolled down the companionway.

"Let's go, boys! Boat in trouble."

Barney piled out the hatch with the rest of them. He had a half-formed hunch there was something he should do, but before he could develop it into a full-fledged thought, McCrady barked at him:

"Come on, come on, snap into it! Get those springlines off her."

As Barney stumbled to his post the big engines came alive. Their powerful staccato coughing attracted people up and down the waterfront. Clouds of white exhaust poured out of her stern, skipped briefly on the water to whirl away like dust.

Barney clutched the rail and fumbled with the springlines. They were going out

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into a storm. He wanted to jump ashore and stay there.

Joe Bunch ran up and elbowed him aside. Joe didn't hang onto anything; he gave both hands to the ship. McCrady took his place on the upper bridge and ran the boat up a little on the lines so Joe could slip them over the bitts. Leary cast off the sternlines.

Barney went over to the wheelhouse and hung to the rail. He looked into the eager faces of the crowds on the dock to whom the call of the Coast Guard was an exciting event. Barney looked above to the flag and the commission pennant shredding in the wind. They gave him no thrill, only another ache as they indicated the wind's force.

McCrady leaned over the windbreaker on the flying bridge and when the lines were free, put his engines in reverse and let the sea swing him clear of the dock. To anyone but Barney, it was a pleasure to watch the chief maneuver of the old *six-bitter*. Once clear, McCrady put his engines ahead and started in a graceful arc toward the breakwater light. The crowd sent up a cheer—that suddenly went sour.

IT WAS evident even to Barney that something was radically wrong, for although the engines were purring like a tickled cat, *803* began to chase her own stern.

"What's the matter!" shouted McCrady. "Aren't those docklines off?"

Joe Bunch ran up the deck. "All off, sir. How about the rudder?"

The Chief spun the wheel first to starboard, then to port. "She's not fouled! Here take the wheel." He jangled the engineroom signals to stop and stalked aft. There was again that metallic glint in his eye as he noticed several hundred people watching his plight with varying shades of bewilderment and amusement. Oleson had his head out of the engineroom hatch. His face hardened.

"They're both turnin' over okay."

McCrady stuck his head down and looked at the tachometers himself. They verified the engineer's assertion. Satisfied that the engines were doing their bit, and that all lines were free of the dock, McCrady checked to see if some fool had cast out an anchor. All the hooks rested snugly in their chocks. He took a quick glance at *803's* position. The tide was taking them into shoal water.

Just then Barney remembered what he had tried to remember before. He peered around the wheelhouse, took one long look at the line taut from the stanchion and ducked up to the flying bridge where a worried Joe Bunch stood at the wheel.

"Hey, Joe," gasped Barney.

"Beat it!" grated Joe. He couldn't stand Barney right now.

"The pail," persisted Barney, "it's trailing. See!" He pointed down to the deck.

Joe glanced over his shoulder to see where the Chief was, then he yanked a knife out of his pocket.

"Look, kid, take this an' cut that line. Just cut it an' then duck out of sight. Sink with the bucket would be better. Scram!"

Barney took the knife and fled. He severed the line and simultaneously Joe Bunch rang for speed. *803* straightened like a hound unleashed and lay on her course. Barney pulled himself to his feet and turned to find McCrady surveying him with a jaundiced eye.

Barney forced a grin. "I guess I forgot the bucket." He couldn't think of anything else to say with the Chief staring at him like that. How was he, Barney, to know that a dragging pail would pull a big tub like *803* off her course? "I'm sorry," he added.

McCrady didn't say anything. He smiled. It wasn't a warm smile; it was like a crack in a block of ice. Then he went up on the bridge and took the wheel from his mate.

"Keep him away from me, Joe," McCrady muttered. "Just keep him out of my sight until we get back. Then I'm going to kick the tar out of him and transfer the remains. I'm licked, Joe. After twenty years I pick a dud like him. . . ."

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But Joe Bunch had fled.

Barney was clinging to the after-hatch, enjoying a touch of seasickness when Joe found him.

"Get below," the mate ordered.

"I quit," moaned Barney. "I want a transfer."

"You're gettin' it," Joe said grimly. "You're no good to us." He left Barney and went below. He climbed into his oilskins, put on a sou'wester, picked up McCrady's slicker and took it onto the bridge.

THE patrol-boat was rounding the island and as she nosed into the bay, they got a sample of the weather. The sea was running against the tide kicking up a short chop that slopped aboard; at this speed *803* was a wet boat. Joe took the wheel so McCrady could climb into his slicker.

"This call," said the Chief, "is for a cruiser stalled in the Gut."

Joe squinted at the angry sky. "I'm glad it's not outside. Couldn't tow much in this weather." He watched a big wave slap the starboard bow and fume aboard, and he ducked so as to take the spray on the top of his sou'wester.

They picked up the cruiser in another ten minutes. She was holding her nose into them, stubbornly, but without enough power to buck the blockade of wind and the tide.

McCrady had changed his course toward her, when Leary ducked out of the wheelhouse and swung himself onto the bridge.

"Radio message, Chief," he shouted. "There's a lumber schooner in trouble off Montauk with all hands aboard. A cutter is leaving New London an' the *Annapolis* is somewhere north of her."

"Did they give her position?"

"Not exact. She was reported about forty miles southwest of Montauk at nine this morning."

"Tell 'em we'll take it."

Leary looked at the dripping face of Joe Bunch, then he said: "Yes, sir," and went back to the wheelhouse.

Joe didn't say anything either, but he studied the sky and the water, and he gauged the wind with his cheek. He felt the steady vibrations of the big engines against the bottoms of his feet, and he took a fresh hold on the rail as the Chief turned abeam the sea and eased within hailing distance of the cruiser.

"What's the trouble?" McCrady bellowed through his megaphone.

A fat man in white flannels and enough gold braid on his cap to be an admiral clung to the rail of the cruiser. "We haven't enough power to buck this current!" he shouted.

"Of course you haven't," the Chief told him. "Stop fighting it and run in close to shore. You'll find a back-eddy there that'll carry you safely around the point. Get it?"

"I guess so."

"Oil and gas okay?"

"Yes," yelled the fat man, and hurried in out of the weather.

McCrady set his legs farther apart and put the wheel over. *803* canted sharply into the trough, wallowed heavily, then put her nose through a short sea and came up, tossing it back like a mane.

"Better check up, Joe."

Bunch made a gesture of assent and turned away without speaking. Watching the seas, he ducked aft and stuck his head into the engineroom.

"We're goin' outside, Swede," he shouted.

Oleson waved that he understood, and Joe took a deep breath. The engineroom was warm with the sweetish smell of hot oil. The steady explosions of the big engines became something you could feel right in your bones. Joe sighed and when he backed outside again the wind nearly tore his hat off. He met Leary coming out of the galley.

"Everything's snug below. I made a pot of coffee—just in case."

Joe nodded and hung to the rail a moment, getting his bearings. They were butting their way through a crazy cross-sea that almost amounted to surf. The shore-

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line was painfully close but Joe knew there was a current in here that would save time, and McCrady was shaving the minutes. Then Joe Bunch remembered Barney.

HE FOUND Barney wedged into his bunk, his face green. Joe started to say something sharp, then he remembered the first time he had gone outside in a gale like this one. That was a long, long time ago, but Joe still remembered how he felt that night. So he braced himself between the bunk and the bulkhead above the boy and shouted to make himself heard against the numbing combination of engines and storm.

"Look, kid—we're goin' outside!"

Barney rolled his head. A sea spilled him out of his bunk and the mate helped him climb back in.

Joe yelled in Barney's ear. "This is your last trip, kid. The Chief's transferrin' you when we come back. So get up an' take it for once."

Barney pulled himself to a sitting position. "Maybe we won't come back."

"Look—there's a schooner out there someplace with men aboard. We got to go out—that's our job. It don't say nothin' about comin' back." Joe turned and swung up the companionway. When he opened the hatch, a wave sloshing over foamed down on Barney. Then he was gone, leaving Barney alone.

He clung to the berth, watching water seep down the steps and zigzag across the red linoleum floor-covering leaving a graphic chart of the boat's roll. The constant crash of seas against the hull drove him out of the bunk.

No man-made thing could stand such a beating, he told himself. He crawled into his oilskins, tied himself into a life jacket, and pawed his way to the deck.

The wind sucked at him and a boarding graybeard poured over him, flooding down his neck and up his sleeves. When it seethed past, he waited until the last of it boiled out the scuppers, then he ran for the bridge.

McCrady was driving her hard, and old *803* seemed to Barney about as substantial as a flimsy surfboard. She flinched under each crushing impact, but kept boring ahead like a terrier. Barney went over and stood beside Joe Bunch.

The Chief glanced sideways once and saw him there, but made no comment. If McCrady was worried, he didn't show it. His features showed no expression at all, save once he smiled when Joe misjudged his dodging, and took a dirty sea across the face. McCrady seemed to suddenly have grown in stature; he seemed big and strong and capable to Barney who felt small and futile.

Leary came up. "The cutter's turning back," he reported. "No trace of the schooner. They think she's gone down."

McCrady nodded and kept his eyes ahead. Leary waited a while, then looked questioningly at Bunch. The mate waved him away, and *803* held her course.

A squall boiled by, and then it was dark. Leary came up again.

"New London wants our position, an' what we're goin' to do."

McCrady said: "Approximately sixty miles southwest of Montauk."

"They want to know . . ." began Leary.

"We'll keep going," said McCrady. Later when Disher crawled up to the flying bridge and reported that the gas was down to the halfway mark, McCrady said: "We're buckin' the sea now; we won't need so much going back."

Another half hour and the *Annapolis* reported she was abandoning the search. The wind increased. The black seas rolled and heaved in torment and when their jagged crests broke white, the wind ripped them off into driving spume. Above, a wan moon appeared in the sullen sky like a pale beacon for the racing clouds.

The scene was indelibly etched on Barney's mind. The dark gray foredeck of the little seventy-five-footer tossing the white plumed seas over her shoulder; the driving spume ripping across the top of the windbreaker of the flying bridge where McCrady stood so stolidly at the wheel; the pale light of the binnace illumining his

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wet face from below, giving it a strange saturnic cast. Above, the commission pennant streamed aft as though of steel; a tattered battleflag still flying. And then the afterdeck shimmering in the uneasy moonlight, to the stern which lay a silver zipper across the angry sea.

AT TEN o'clock McCrady shouted: "Look! A light!" And he pointed northward. Five minutes passed before the others saw it—a timid flickering. The course was altered and *803* really began to roll. She dove into troughs that seemed without bottom. Barney clung there, sure they would keep on going down, down, and then she would corkscrew to the top of the next sea and slide down the other side.

Joe Bunch ripped the canvas cover off the big floodlight, and they found the schooner.

She looked like a dead whale, lying there on her beam end. They saw her in glimpses, between the lather of tortured foam. Barney thrust his head over the windbreak and tried to see. But the spume stung his eyes shut until he made a lattice of his fingers and peered between them. Then the schooner mounted a crest full in the beam of light and Barney saw the men.

They were tied to the rigging where it met the rail. Nine tiny twisted figures; four on the main rigging, five on the fore. Then a savage comber broke over the derelict, shaking her like Barney's old hound used to kill a coon. When the schooner heaved clear again, there were only four men on each set of shrouds.

Barney gasped. He counted them again. He could not believe the sea had murdered a man before his eyes. He clutched at McCrady's arm.

"One's gone!" he cried.

McCrady nodded without turning his head. A spout of water drained off the visor of his cap and in the reflected light, his face was hard.

Making a megaphone of one hand, the mate bawled: "She's breakin' up fast, Mac. She's trailin' a lot of gear. Look out!"

The Coast Guard boat fought her way around in a great circle. Leary was suddenly up beside Barney, hanging grimly on.

"We can't do a thing," he yelled in Barney's ear, "only maybe watch 'em drown. Can't launch a boat in this sea."

Barney could see that. He didn't say anything, just hung there with his head bent into it. His eyes pained and he knew they were swelling fast. But he couldn't tear himself away.

"Any use radioin' the *Annapolis?*" shouted the mate.

McCrady shook his head. "She won't last. Get out the line-throwing gun."

Leary took the light while the mate broke out the gun. Joe braced himself until the chief put the patrol boat above the schooner, then he shot his line so it fell directly amidships between the two groups of men. Joe took back the floodlight and held it on the hull.

A seaman left the mainshrouds and began to inch along the slippery hull towards the precious line. Barney found himself crying, maybe praying a little; he wasn't sure what he was doing.

Beside him McCrady was watching, too, turning the big brass wheel to keep clear of the wreckage and give the line enough scope. Barney could hear the jangle of the engineroom controls, and feel the boat shudder as the engines were reversed, then slammed ahead. He was soaked and chilled to the bone, but his palms around the brass rail were sweating.

Again and again furry white fingers of foam clawed the seaman edging along the wreck, but he fought them off until he reached the rope. Bunch led a spontaneous cheer when the man wormed back with the line. The men on the wreck waved enthusiastically. Then hope died as a heavy sea swept the ships apart and the line broke.

Bunch turned to Barney. "Get another line below!"

Barney ducked around in the lee of the bridge, waited until a sea washed out the scuppers, then dove down the forward

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hatch. It was black below, but Barney didn't need light. He knew where that line would be, where it should be. He learned in ten seconds what McCrady and Bunch had tried for five months to teach him. A place for everything.

Back on deck with the line. Joe shot it again.

"I'm going closer this time," McCrady bawled.

Closer! Gear and wreckage trailing to windward; debris and cargo sprawling in the lee. If one line caught around their propeller . . . ! No need to talk of it; the guardsmen knew.

"Break out the life raft!" ordered McCrady.

BARNEY and Leary tore loose the doughnut-shaped raft. To the end of the thin whipline Joe had shot aboard the wreck, they secured an inch-thick rope and signaled the survivors on the hull to haul it over. The raft was fastened to this inch rope and pulled over to the wreck, but not until the boys had secured another rope for the purpose of hauling it back to the patrol boat.

The sea let them get it almost over, then again she swept the boats apart, and the raft was lost.

"We're licked, Mac!" yelled the mate. "She's goin' to pieces!"

Eight men, prayed Barney, eight men lined up like clay pigeons!

McCrady ordered: "Get Swede and Disher up here!" and when the engineroom crew climbed up beside him, he swung around.

"Any ideas?"

Nobody said anything. Then the Chief told them: "There's one chance—if it will work. She's coming apart, but if we could hold our nose against her keel just long enough . . ." He paused with a shrug.

They all knew what that meant, even Barney.

He stared across at the derelict. She was nearly three times the size of *803,* and she was coming to pieces. He watched a massive timber whip loose and lash end from end in an orgy of freedom. A timber like that would stave through the patrol-boat as though she were an egg shell. *Hold our nose against the keel!* A keel that heaved and squirmed. A keel that might slew sideways and slide over them, or shave the topsides out of *803.*

It couldn't be done!

McCrady was jockeying her around to the lee, waiting for their comment. Oleson, the big Swede, wiped the foam and sweat from his viking features. "It might work," he boomed. "I stand by my engines." And he was gone.

McCrady rang for full ahead and scudded downwind, then rolled around and started up in the lee.

"Get out some lines," the mate told Barney and Leary.

"Let's go, sailor," yelled the cook.

Barney hesitated. Then the light caught those eight men, and he plunged sobbing after the cook. The lifeline burned his palms as he worked forward, huddling in terror every time a sea washed over him. He tore off a hatch cover and pulled out a line.

"Tie it around your waist!" advised Leary.

Barney looked up and screamed in fear. The vast hull of the schooner loomed out of the storm before them. He wrapped his arms around a stanchion and looked back. The floodlight almost blinded him, but beneath it he could distinguish the white cap of McCrady, his blue features lighted from below.

The schooner rose and fell with each churning sea, bigger and more menacing. McCrady kept coming closer. Barney could tell each move he made by the shudder of the engines. Ahead, now full ahead! Stop engines! Half ahead. Stop! Astern, full astern!

BARNEY fought himself up into the bow and got a line around his waist and tied himself to the one-pounder. He took every sea now across the face, but it no longer mattered. McCrady was cutting down the distance. Thirty feet, twenty

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feet . . . A sea picked up the wreck, lifted it high, higher.

Barney was looking up. It was coming over them, going to drop right smack on the deck of the little Coast Guard boat. He saw it in the brilliant light. Every detail! The green whiskers, the warts of barnacles smothered in foam.

He felt the engines under him shuddering in full reverse. Then the sea suddenly dropped the derelict as though she were too heavy to carry, and when she fell level, McCrady pushed ahead and with a solid bump, the seventy-five footer pushed against the wreck.

The schooner lay across their bow like the top bar of a T. She had to stay like that. If she slewed either way there would be no second attempt. Barney saw a man's head over the sleek bottom. He tossed the weighted end of his line and the man caught it. Barney started to pull, but the man jerked for more scope and Barney paid it out through his free hand. When he felt another jerk, he began to haul in.

The hull was below him when he began pulling, then it started to heave upward. The keel came clear of the water, sawing up the stem of *803*. Barney reeled in frantically until he felt the line grow taut and he knew he had a human being on the other end of it. One hand for the ship, the other for himself! But he could not pull in a man with one hand!

He forgot rules, forgot everything, save that living man he could not yet see. He braced himself against the gun and pulled.

He found himself shouting and then Leary was helping him. The wreck towered above them for a moment, then sank back. When they saw the man's head even with the deck, Barney snubbed his end of the line and crawled forward. A wave helped them by washing the man aboard, nearly taking him over again. Barney clung to him and they sloshed down the deck.

The man could not stand, so Barney dragged him to the pilothouse. Disher evolved out of the storm and helped.

Back again to the bow. Leary had cast again. Another man.

Seven men . . .

"The skipper," sobbed the seventh man "His arms are broke!"

Barney slammed out of the wheelhouse and bent double to claw his way along the life line. He heard a hail and turning saw the mate leaning over the windbreak.

"Hurry!" Joe bawled. "We can't hold much longer!"

"There's one more!"

Barney slid his raw palms along the line. Sometimes he had to hold himself back when the deck abruptly fell away before him, then it would rise and become a slippery hill. He reached the gun where Leary had tied himself.

The wreck sawed down the stem of the patrol-boat and they glimpsed the schooner captain tied to his rigging.

In the floodlight his face was cold and set, and he slumped heavily against the rope around his chest. He shook his head —nodding for them to sheer away and save themselves. Barney looked at those limp-hanging arms, and then back to the firm resolute face.

The man on the wreck looked strangely ordinary, like any other man, like a hundred men Barney had seen. Then the face changed and became Barney's own face, and Barney's heart told him what that skipper was feeling.

The man was nodding them away again. McCrady would have courage like that; cold and dispassionate, without heroics. So would be Joe Bunch, and Oleson, even Leary.

"Hurry!" came Joe's hail.

Barney was hurrying. He whipped a line around his chest under the shoulders, and passed the other end to Leary. "I'm going over!"

"You won't make it!" the cook shouted, but he didn't try to stop Barney. He took the line, snapped a bight around the bitt, and braced himself.

BARNEY crawled out on the nose between the chocks. He waited until the sea brought the wreck level with his deck, then he leaped. His feet hit the slime of the bottom and shot from under him,

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but his groping hands found the rail and he pulled himself up. He inched along it, hooking his foot in a scupper as a sea tried to shake him off.

The man in the rigging grinned, and wagged his head. There was no use attempting talk. Barney hauled up beside him. He took slack in on his own safety line and made a loop in it. Through that he rove the line with which the seaman was lashed to the shrouds.

Then Barney tried to haul the seaman along the rail towards the stem, but halfway over he knew he would never make it. There wasn't time, and his strength was going fast. He turned his face up into the flood and saw the silhouettes of Leary and Disher outlined on the patrol-boat. Then the shadow of Bunch was there too.

"Jump!" he heard someone shout.

He shook his head. He couldn't jump into that cauldron of foam.

"Cut me loose, boy!" the crippled captain yelled in his ear. "You can't make it!"

A sea began to lift the schooner and turn her over. Barney screamed: "Wrap your legs around me!" Then he scrambled to the slippery edge of the hull and slid down the lee side.

The water closed over his head and he knew they were spinning on the end of the line. He felt the man's legs scissor around his own, and he held on tight. He had no sensation of pull, but soon the water fell away and he could breathe again, and then hands were hauling at them and they were on deck.

"Hang here until we get clear!" the mate shouted in his ear. Barney nodded and lay flat, hugging the stanchions. He felt the engines vibrating in full reverse.

The hull lurched in pursuit as McCrady fought to keep his own boat backing straight. Keeping that T formation. Barney saw the timbers churning out of the wreck and tumbling after them. Then the engines changed and the boat trembled in her length as she went ahead.

Barney tried to close out the sight, but he couldn't. The wreck rushed down on them, broaching around their quarter. It was close, closer, and then there was nothing ahead but wind and sea and storm. Barney crawled around in the shelter of the forward hatch and crouched there alone. There was a sharp pain in his side. He began to laugh, and then he cried.

Nobody bothered him. Once Leary crawled past him and went down in the galley. After a while he came back up with coffee.

"Come on into the wheelhouse, kid. The schooner captain wants to see you."

"Later," said Barney, "maybe."

"You're all right, sailor," Leary said, and ducked for the wheelhouse.

Barney stood and moved aft. He paused, holding onto the life line and looked into the wheelhouse. In the dim light, he saw the seamen sprawled around on the deck where Joe and Disher were helping make them comfortable. Barney couldn't go in there yet, not until he was sure of himself. He climbed up on the bridge.

The storm was still blowing the same, but it didn't seem so bad now, and it was howling from the stern. McCrady was alone at the wheel. He looked at Barney and grinned, but he made no comment of any kind. Barney moved up closer and looked down over the windbreak. The moon had taken fresh courage and he could see the full length of *803*.

Behind, following seas tried to come aboard, but the nimble patrol-boat kept ahead. Barney suddenly understood. Always ready, for anything. He leaned over.

"Say, Chief. About that transfer. I . . ."

McCrady gave that quick smile. "What transfer is that, Barney?"

"Nothing, I guess. Only if it's all the same to you, sir, I'd like to work for my white ticket aboard this boat."

The Chief kept his eyes on the course. He could see the Montauk light now. "I can still pick 'em," he said aloud.

"What's that, sir?"

McCrady grinned. "I said it's okay with me, kid."

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The pain in his chest, he realized, was nothing more or less than a prodding rifle

Sheep Dog

By ROBERT W. COCHRAN

Author of "White Lady," "Fugitives Three," etc.

In twenty-nine years Woody Sanderson had never missed a fugitive, had never known fear, and had never felt the touch of Death on his shoulder. Then all that was changed, on one snowy night when the ice was too thin and the hunted man too clever

WOODY SANDERSON had been sheriff of Talbot County for twenty-nine years. That proved two things—or should have: First, that he was probably the only sheriff in the state who had held office that length of time and was therefore a competent officer; and second, that he was too old to start out on a manhunt with winter only a few hours away.

People were often fooled by Woody Sanderson, particularly strangers. He did not look at all like the sheriffs you see in the movies, and not much like the ones you read about in books and magazines. Perhaps that was another reason why he had held office for so long.

He shaved only twice a week, with the result that about two-thirds of the time his heavy-jowled face was covered by a thick scrub of hair. Once, he had grown a beard but his political opponents had seized upon it as proof that anyone who looked so much like Santa Claus couldn't make a good sheriff, so he had promptly reverted to his old schedule of shaving each Wednesday and Sunday morning.

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If things were quiet in the county, and they frequently were, he made it a practice to conduct his two granddaughters to Sunday School. Even his enemies admitted that he was an easy mark for anyone in distress, so that after twenty-nine years of steady employment he had nothing put by for a rainy day, a fact that his plump and usually good-natured wife frequently called to his attention.

He was preparing to shave the Wednesday morning that Dolly Cooper burst through the kitchen door and sobbed out her story. The Coopers lived on a clearing three miles west of town. The sheriff knew the location as well as he knew the inside of his own pocket. For forty of his fifty-eight years he had hunted and fished, and even, in his young, foolish days, prospected through the entire district.

A man had come to the Coopers' home the previous night, a stranger heading on foot for the mining camps to the northwest. November nights were such that no one would have allowed a stray animal to sleep without shelter, so the Coopers had made the stranger welcome and given him a spare bunk in their two-room cabin.

In the morning the man had demanded food, a gun, money, things that the Coopers were ill prepared to part with. Guy Cooper, little and quick and inclined to sudden outbursts of temper, had ordered the stranger off the place. Dolly was all but incoherent from that point on, but the sheriff and his wife gathered that in the quarrel that followed, the stranger had snatched Guy's gun down from the deer antlers and shot Guy once through the head and once through the body.

While the sheriff listened he had been buckling on his holster. He pulled on fur-lined gloves and a sheepskin coat, and with a word to his wife as to the care to be taken of Dolly Cooper, he shucked a cap down over his tousled hair and went out to crank up the car that had served him since before the depression had hit the country.

The sheriff never carried a watch, but when the car finally surrendered after a stubborn but futile resistance, he took a quick glance at the mist-shrouded sun and decided if he worked fast he might be back by noon. There was a light snow on the ground, and as he rumbled over the frozen ruts, he began to form a definite plan of campaign.

He sighed regretfully, remembering he had not eaten since the previous night, and by way of solace lit the charred pipe that had been the cause of more than one argument between his wife and himself.

HE CAME to the Cooper homestead. Sat for a moment in the car after he had cut the motor. The sound of his arrival was absorbed by the silence. The Coopers had a few pigs, a few chickens, and not much else. He appraised the unfrightened movements of these in the stump-littered yard and decided that the murderer was probably already five miles away. Once he reached the ore mines to the northwest, the chance of his capture would be slight.

With the deliberation of a man who has decided upon his objective and doesn't mean to be turned from it, the sheriff descended from the car and approached the one door of the cabin. The pigs and chickens scattered before him.

He clicked his tongue when he opened the door and saw the small sprawled figure of the dead man upon the floor. Because he never left anything to chance, he spent valuable minutes feeling for pulse and heartbeat. Then he lifted the already stiffening body, carried it into the only bedroom and placed it on the still unmade bed.

There were cold biscuits on the tables, and he took three of these as he went back through the kitchen. He circled the house three times in widening circles before he found footprints leading off to the northwest.

It had taken him more than an hour. He began to doubt if he would return by noon, and munched the last of the biscuits before he again brought his pipe from his

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pocket. This time he did not light it.

He made certain that his thirty-eight was free in its holster, pulled back the flaps of his cap, and followed the tracks in the snow. Since Guy's rifle was not in the cabin, it was fairly certain that the murderer had it—for defense or, more likely, for attack.

The sheriff's advance was slow. Twenty years before, he might have moved faster, but experience and age had taught him to take things easy.

For the most part he kept his eyes ahead of him rather than on the prints. There was little wild life to alarm or warn him. Once a flock of crows cawed upward at his approach, and he was confident that for a time at least he could relax his vigilance.

When he came to open glades he invariably scanned the sky, and was not surprised when flakes of snow floated down. This only made him step a little faster. If he could decide the other man's approximate course he might be able to take a shortcut, knowing the country as he did; but until then he was wholly dependent upon the tracks. These, he saw when he came to the next break in the forest, were fast blotted out by the snow.

He could no longer see even the slightest radiance of the sun when he attempted to pierce the descending blanket. It didn't bother him much; he remembered times when he had gone without food for days on a stretch, and he had always survived.

Two things alone were necessary for life in the winter woods: dry clothing, and a fire. If he wanted luxury, there was his pipe, which, even in the absence of tobacco, could be chewed with relish.

It grew slightly warmer, and then the thing that he had been fearing happened. He came to a wide expanse of unforested snow that sloped down to the smooth surface of a lake, and the dim outline of the prints he had been following disappeared. The snow made a vague tapestry before him that thickened to a blending wall.

He recognized the place. Ten years before he had shot a deer almost where he was now standing. The animal, wounded, had tried to escape by swimming the long, sausagelike lake that stretched for five miles on either side of him.

He walked slowly as he approached the snow-covered ice, not certain that the weather had been sufficiently cold to thicken the ice enough to bear a man's weight. When he felt the smooth glassiness beneath his feet, he moved backward and tried to think what a fugitive would do.

THE falling snow made an icing for his cap and sheepskin coat and clung, until it melted, to the short stubble of his beard. The murderer, he reasoned, had probably been heading deliberately for the lake. The sudden storm that had covered his tracks would give him a sense of security.

If the man had risked the ice holding his weight and crossed the lake, to fail to follow him would give him too great a lead. If, on the other hand, the murderer, feeling himself safe, had circled the lake, the sheriff could, by crossing on the ice, cut the ten-mile lead down to where he might again pick up the tracks; or, he might gain the lead, so that it would only be necessary to watch for the other's approach.

The falling snow would to some extent even the odds of the murderer's rifle against his own thirty-eight.

There was, of course, the possibility that the man, fearing pursuit, would not strike out in a direct line for the mining camps. The sheriff considered this and decided to stake everything on the man's eagerness to reach the camps and conceal his identity among hundreds of other drifters.

Once his decision was made, the sheriff again stepped out upon the ice. The snow made sharp squeaking sounds beneath his heavy shoes, but that was all. The ice gave no indication that it was not strong enough to hold the weight of one man or of a hundred.

The lake here was not two miles wide, and as the ice continued to hold he moved

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faster than he had on land. Ahead he could see the gray outline of trees that flanked the shore. Then without warning the ice buckled beneath his feet, and in spite of his desperate forward lunge, with his body spreadeagled to distribute his weight, he found himself floundering in the icy water.

Woody Sanderson had always been proud of his clear-headedness in an emergency. He was clear-headed now. Twenty years earlier it might have been nothing more than a disagreeable experience, for which his good-natured wife would reproach him. But twenty years had added fifty pounds to his weight and subtracted vitality and endurance in like proportion.

The sting of the water cut into him like a thousand sharp-pointed darts. He felt its surge up through his trouser legs and in the sleeves of his sheepskin coat.

The thick clothing that had been, until now, a protection against the winter's cold, became suddenly a menace. His heavy boots, the thick wool socks that had been feather-light, became sheets of down-pulling lead. Even the gun at his side was, abruptly, a threat.

The pipe slipped from between his clenched teeth and disappeared beneath the ice-flecked water.

With as much care as though he had hours instead of seconds to reach his goal, he propelled himself forward until his fingers clutched the rough edge of the broken ice. Without attempting to draw his body upon the snow-covered surface, he sustained himself, allowing his gray eyes to judge the distance to the shore. Without the added weight of his winter's clothing he thought it probable he might break his way shoreward until he could touch bottom with his feet. He discarded the idea; it would mean ten, perhaps fifteen minutes, and his clothing would drag him under long before that.

Placing his weight gradually on his arms as he pushed them across the ice, he tried to crawl upward. His head, his shoulders, his chest, he brought slowly to the ice-surface, moving his hands and arms like some grotesque seal. Then, with scarcely a sound, the ice upon which his body lay extended split from the rest, and before he could regain balance his head disappeared beneath the surface.

Even now he was not panicky. What had started as an annoying accident became a desperate fight for life. Before he had quite expelled the water from his mouth, he was busy stripping off the heavy coat. It slipped from his shoulders and by its own weight pulled off his arms, carrying his gloves with it. His shoes, laced tight with rawhide, he could not hope to reach, but the thirty-eight, when he had loosened the buckle on the holster, followed the coat to the bottom.

HE REMEMBERED the deer he had shot ten years before and the valiant animal's hopeless effort to escape across the lake. He had been a little ashamed of himself even at the time, when he finally brought the animal to shore in a boat he had walked a mile to secure. He had never considered at the time that some day he too would fight for his life in the same body of water.

His teeth chattered and cut blood from his lips as he prepared to make another try. Lightened now and more careful than before, he caught a piece of floating ice and sliding this before him brought it finally to make a second layer upon the unbroken ice in front of him.

The wish went through his mind that he had been able to put something aside for his wife. He didn't admit, even to himself, that he was not going to win to safety, but he knew to the last detail just how serious his position was, knew even if he escaped from the water that chilled through to his bones he might not survive the freezing cold that would cling to his soaked clothing.

Then, too, there was the man with a rifle, who had killed once. . . .

His forearms resting on the double thickness of ice, he turned at right angles, kicking his body to the surface. The ice sent out little sharp cracking sounds that

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he dared not heed. He brought a thigh, a leg, then his entire side upon the ice; it groaned threateningly. He squirmed crabwise. His other leg came up and he took a minute to get his breath.

The snow continued to fall, softly, evenly, endlessly, as though wishing to hide the tragedy.

He realized, even before he moved with a snail's slowness, that the sheltering trees, offering a slender protection from the cold, had kept the ice from forming quite so thickly near the shore.

The snow, as he edged along, made of him a giant white caterpillar. His raw, bleeding hands, cut by the ice and reddened by the water and air, left tiny flecks of blood that were instantly blotted out by the descending flakes.

The skeleton trees, visible through the white curtain, seemed never to come nearer. Once an arm upon which he rested too much weight disappeared beneath the ice. He stopped, not wishing by a single hasty movement to jeopardize his safety. Ten yards, no more, separated him from the shore when again the ice parted and he floundered waist-deep, experiencing, for the first time, before his feet found the solid bottom, the shock of fear.

He crushed through the remaining ice, and turning when he reached the shore looked back triumphantly to what had so nearly proved to be the end of the trail.

Only the heat of his body, he knew, was preventing his clothes from freezing. His first thought was for a fire. Dangerous as it would be—since the man he was hunting might more easily stalk him—if he hoped to survive he must have dry clothes.

The hand that brought the matches from his pocket trembled when he saw the purple pulp that had once been the sulphur heads. Carefully he separated them, hoping that one among the lot might still be serviceable. When the final one had sifted through his fingers to the snow, he sighed.

It was a soft sound from so big a man, a sound of acceptance rather than of bitterness. His eyes fell upon the silver star that was fastened to the water-darkened vest, and the broad, thick shoulders straightened. With hands already numbing he unclasped the catch and slipped the badge into his pocket.

IT WAS still hours from nightfall. He felt unconsciously for his pipe before he remembered that it was in the lake. He quickly surveyed the trees, comparing them to the blanketed shoreline of the lake, and turned into the woods. If he was lucky—he had never had to depend on luck before—he might still find the man he was looking for and get the fire that he so sorely needed.

He walked for an hour, hands in his trousers pockets, head down, shoulders hunched against the snow and the cold. Twice he stopped and examined trees that stood apart from others like landmarks. When he stopped a third time it was where a blaze marked a trail through the woods.

His eyes glinting, he dropped on his knees and sent a careful glance over the white carpet. At first he was disappointed; then he saw it—the outline so dim from the descending flakes it was all but invisible; but it was there, and once discovered, it was easy to trace others forward and back.

An hour ago, perhaps longer, a man had traveled along that trail to the northwest.

A change both subtle and distinct came over him as he advanced. Like a veteran dog that scents game in a barren field, he felt age and weariness drop from his shoulders; and there was almost a spring in his step as he increased his pace. To turn back, with the almost certain prospect before him of a night in the open, in freezing clothes, without fire or shelter, was impossible.

The mining camps were still eighty miles ahead—eighty miles of snow and ice and cold that might well take a week instead of two days. Yet four, five miles ahead of him, perhaps a shorter distance, a man traveled who could furnish food

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and fire, and who could also, in one swift, sudden movement, send a messenger of death from the rifle he carried.

For two hours he moved forward with all possible speed. He knew it was late afternoon by the increased cold.

The snow no longer melted in the scrubby beard, but clung and under the heat of his body changed slowly from snow to ice. The long winter dusk was creeping down through the stark, leafless trees, adding a more complete curtain to that already furnished by the descending snow.

The tracks, he could still see by bending until his eyes were nearly level with his knees, were covered now by only a thin fuzz of flakes. Still he dared not slow his pace lest the man leave the trail, trusting to the darkness and the falling snow to confuse anyone trying to follow.

His hands, which he tried to warm by flailing together, were already white instead of red. His nose and ears had ceased to give off the tingling warning that comes before numbness.

His body swayed and his feet no longer moved in a straight line, but he was unaware of it. Like a grotesque mechanical toy he would continue to move forward while he remained erect, and failing this would thresh his feet in a final spasm of energy if he fell to the trail.

His senses had dulled in spite of his resolve. Something hard and painfully sharp pressed into his breast and brought him to a complete stop. "In a hurry, feller?" a man's voice asked from the gray darkness.

HE KNEW without giving conscious thought to it that the pain in his chest was caused by a rifle barrel. He didn't know that he had been breathing hard until he heard the harsh sound of his own breath in his throat.

His teeth rattled together like dice in a box when he opened his mouth to speak. "Fire," he said, "freezing," and tried to whip his sluggish brain to act in spite of the weariness that was creeping over him.

Then he was aware that the rifle barrel no longer pressed into his breast. He swayed forward for lack of its support. The man still stood, a menacing, snow-covered figure; and the sheriff heard a tiny click. A small sound that might have been made by a finger tightening on the worn mechanism of a rifle-trigger, cleared the cobwebs of fatigue from his brain. "Jack," he said, "you get me a fire and I'll give you a handful of nuggets."

The seconds that followed dragged out so long that he had time to think of Dolly Cooper, and her husband lying dead back in the dingy little cabin. He even thought of his wife, probably still keeping his dinner warm in the oven.

The sheriff hadn't seen three decades of bad men come and go without learning something. He knew that he was safe for the time. If the man had been going to shoot, he would have done it in spite of those promised nuggets.

"Watch it, feller," the man said finally, and the sheriff blinked his eyes in the light of the match that flared in the other man's hand. "You look like a sheep dog to me, feller," the man said finally. "I don't like dogs trackin' me."

"Tracking nothing," the sheriff said. "On my way down to the settlement when this snow started. Tried to cut across the lake and near got drowned. Got a drink, Jack?"

"Yeah," the man said, "for myself. Where's your camp, feller? Where you got these nuggets?"

The sheriff laughed, the high-pitched, almost hysterical laugh of a foolish man or a desperate one. "I got to get a fire," he said, "and a drink; then I'll show you."

The man ran quick, deft hands over the sheriff's body and stepped back. "I'm gamblin' one drink on you, but we ain't buildin' no fire." The sheriff groped for the extended bottle and had to hold it between his two hands because his fingers had no life in them.

"All right, feller," the man said when he had replaced the bottle in his pocket, "I ain't got no time to fool."

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"It won't be easy to find," the sheriff said. "Had a fire and could wait till daylight." The whisky was pounding life back into his chilled body; with a fire . . . But the man's next words convinced him that there would be no fire.

"To hell with it," the man said, and struck a blow with the barrel of the gun that made the sheriff's cheek sting in spite of its numbness.

"Now, Jack," the sheriff said, "there's nothing to get sore about. Maybe if I keep moving I can make it. Let's go."

He led the way along the almost invisible outline of the trail. With a sixth sense, he seemed to know each turn in the trail. Every little hollow, every rise in the snow-covered ground was a familiar landmark. When he forked from the trail, the man behind him called shortly, "Wait, feller."

The sheriff stood still, judging the nearness of the other, balancing his chances of winning in a rough-and-tumble. The man said, "I ain't goin' to foller an old fogy an' not know where I'm goin'."

" 'Bout a mile," the sheriff said, and the falling snow hid the smile that parted the scrubby, ice-filled stubble of hair on his face.

More than once, when he had been deer hunting, he had cursed the disillusioned prospectors who pockmarked the ground with their test shafts and left holes to trap unwary animals. A mile away was was such a hole. He remembered it well, for only two years before he had saved a doe's life that he had found trapped in the pit.

The life he was trying to save this time was his own.

OVERHEAD the trees protested against the ever-increasing weight of snow. Far away a fox gave a series of short, sharp barks. Near at hand, much too near, he could hear the *mush, mush* of the other's footsteps.

He knew that he would have to be very careful. If the other man suspected that he was being led into a trap . . . The sheriff remembered Cooper's sprawled figure as he had found it on the floor of the cabin. Only *his* body, if he failed, would probably not be found until spring, not until the wolves and coyotes had stripped the last shred of flesh from the bones.

He moved slower, trying to pierce the descending snow, attempting unsuccessfully to test each forward step. He felt almost more than he saw the towering pine that was his landmark. Twenty feet from the trunk, a little to the left, a little more. Then he saw it, the white grayness of its depth staring up at him. *Mush, mush,* the footsteps behind came on. The sheriff moved a little way and stood staring upward at the pine's laden branches.

He knew that if this ruse failed, he had lost everything. He had spurred his protesting muscles beyond actual endurance. Failure now could only mean collapse.

"I can't make it, Jack," the sheriff said and swayed, moving a step backward as he tried to recover himself.

The man beside him said hoarsely, "You damn . . ." and moved to one side, the gun butt starting to his shoulder. It never quite got there, and the rest of the sentence was smothered in a shower of descending snow.

The breath went from the sheriff's big body and he trembled, as much from relief as from cold and exhaustion. The man was shouting things from the shaft, but the sheriff moved until he could lean his back against the pine tree and tried to arrange his thoughts.

"Hey, you blasted fool," the man said, "get me out of here."

"Yes, Jack," the sheriff said, "sure. Throw up the rifle and the bottle; then we'll talk."

"I'll see you in Hell first," the man said, and the sheriff heard him frantically trying to scale the steep sides of his prison. He waited—he could afford to wait now—stamping his feet to keep the blood moving in his legs. He wondered if a man could still be sheriff if he had lost all his fingers and toes.

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"Tell you what, Jack," he said finally, "you pitch up the matches and then we'll talk."

"Matches, hell," the man said. "It's warmer here than up there. I ain't standin' around in wet clothes either. You'll be glad to talk soon, if you ain't dead."

The sheriff knew that it was true; not only that, but the other man had probably twenty years' edge on him. A man couldn't do at sixty, what he could at forty.

"Well, Jack," he said after careful deliberation, "I'm not one to stand and freeze if I can help it, so I'll be getting along. You change your mind, you shoot that gun. If I'm not too far I may come back."

He walked a little way and stood listening. He could hear the other's desperate attempts to claw his way upward, his rasping breath, the muttered oaths. He almost felt sorry for the man until he remembered Cooper lying in the little cabin back in the clearing.

If he hadn't been so nearly played out himself, he thought that he might have been able to cut a club and perhaps overcome the other man. The seconds dragged along, each making it more probable that the man wasn't going to give in.

Just when the sheriff was trying to think of some reason he could give for still being there when he was supposed to be two hundred yards away, the man cried, "Hi!" his voice echoing through the stillness of the forest.

The sheriff relaxed against the tree and waited. "Hey, there, wait!" The man was really frightened now. It was what the sheriff had hoped for. A frenzied stream of curses and entreaties came as the sheriff waited, allowing what would have been ample time enough for him to retrace his steps.

"Changed your mind, Jack?" he asked, his usually mild voice husky.

"You old fool," the man said savagely, "you ain't through with me yet. What you want me to do?"

"We'll have the gun first and the matches; oh, yes, and the whisky."

AFTER a long minute the gun was thrown up and sank into the white snow ten feet from where the sheriff stood. His first impulse was to leap for it, but he waited. "The matches," he said, and caught the tiny package before it could sink into the soft snow. "Now the whisky."

"What the blazes," the man said. "How do I know you won't leave me here?"

"You don't," the sheriff said, "but I never left a prisoner to die yet."

There was a long silence, and the sheriff pulled his hands from his trousers pockets and held them beneath his arms for added warmth.

"Who are you, feller?" the man asked finally.

"Just an old sheep dog," the sheriff said. "Twenty miles back there a wolf got in and killed one of my sheep. I've got him now. I've got him in a trap."

"Why, you crazy old fogy," the man said derisively, "you couldn't take me back if I was handcuffed."

The sheriff was busy collecting dead twigs. When he had these aflame he heaped branches on top of the fire. A fire would do two things: it would allow him to thaw out and dry the clothes that were stiff with ice, and it would bring aid if anyone was searching for him. This he doubted, for his tracks had been covered almost as soon as he had made them. He ferreted out the bottle from where it lay concealed and was not surprised that it was empty.

He turned a deaf ear to his prisoner's threats and pleas, and when at last the mounting flames brought stabs of pain into his frosted feet and hands, he started breaking a branch that he could use as a rope.

With steam rising from his clothes in clouds, he caught up the rifle, and making sure the muzzle was not plugged with snow lowered with care a branch until he felt the man's grasp upon it. "Easy now, Jack," he cautioned; "I been through a lot today, and I'm apt to shoot and ask questions after."

"What you trailin' me for?" the man

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asked when he stood again on firm ground. "I ain't done nothin'."

"Maybe not," the sheriff said, "but there's a *G C* on this rifle butt; you can't talk yourself out of that."

He wasn't sure that he could pull the trigger, but he kept the gun pointed at his prisoner. "Turn around and put your hands together," he commanded, and with his free hand pulled a bandanna from his pocket. He thought afterward that he should have been suspicious of the other man's willingness to comply.

"Easy, Jack." He had the loop of the bandanna over the man's hands. The gun was held beneath his arm, the muzzle pressing into his prisoner's back. Suddenly the man whirled and planted a swift, slashing blow on the gray-bearded chin.

The sheriff grunted and brought the rifle butt to his shoulder as he swayed backward. "Go on, shoot." The man laughed and pulled a flaming brand from the fire. The trigger snapped on the empty chamber. "Think I wouldn't have blasted your guts out if I'd had a slug? That nester back there only had two cartridges in the house."

The man laughed again.

The sheriff shook his shaggy head. He had been caught napping. Well, it was the first time in twenty-nine years, and it would likely be the last time, too.

The blazing stick descended in an arc and the sheriff felt it strike his bent shoulders as he made a dive for the man's legs. He grunted with satisfaction as his arms closed and he hugged the smaller figure to him in a desperate embrace.

A shower of sparks cascaded down upon the long hair on the back of his neck and he shook his head savagely. The man fought like a cat, with arms and feet and teeth, twisting, turning, writhing half buried in snow as he struggled to break the old man's arms that moved always higher along his body.

Only when the sheriff's big, raw, bleeding hands had closed upon his prisoner's throat did the little man cease fighting, and his body lay limp upon the snow before the sheriff turned him upon his face and laced the bandanna tightly back and forth across his wrists.

The snow began to thin as they made their plodding way on a shortcut to the lake shore. Careful to choose a spot where no sheltering trees had protected the ice, the sheriff herded his prisoner across the surface and clucked with satisfaction when he saw the bonfire that searchers had lit at the edge of the woods.

It was broad daylight when he entered his own kitchen, warmed by borrowed clothes and cheered by the thought that he still had a clean record.

Mrs. Sanderson protested, "It's a wonder you wouldn't shave. Some day you'll be taken for a tramp, and get shot."

The sheriff looked at the grayish-white stubble in the mirror, and caressed his cheek with tender fingers. "Sheep dog," he said in a whisper, and winked a bloodshot eye at himself.

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by STOOKIE ALLEN

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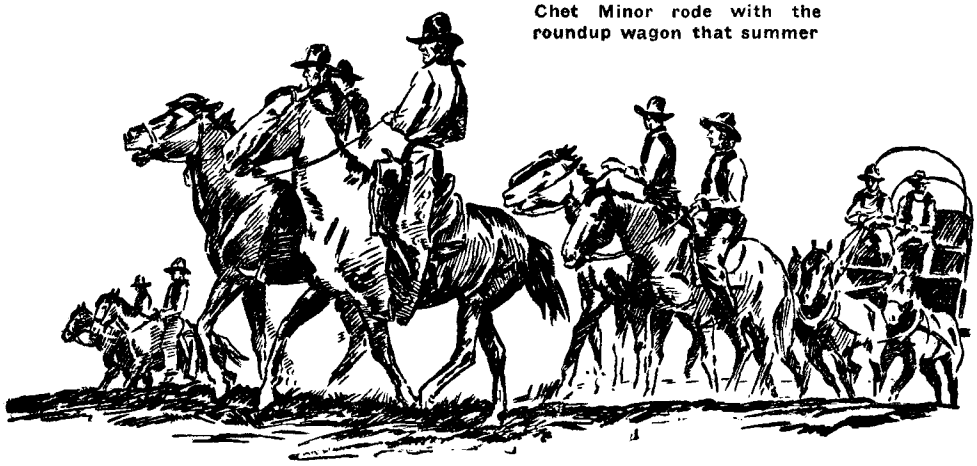

Chet Minor rode with the roundup wagon that summer

Rider of the Rifle Rock

By BENNETT FOSTER

CHET MINOR comes limping back to Rifle Rock, to find himself an outcast in his own world. Some months before Chet was thrown by a horse and injured seriously; now he learns all too quickly that no ranch can use him, a cripple. But he makes an even more bitter discovery; Maida Scotia, the girl he loved, has married Powell Overman, and Overman has become the manager of the Triangle—a job that should rightfully have gone to Chet Minor.

Without hope and embittered by the pity of men who were once his friends, Chet turns to liquor to dull his pain. Ben Revilla, a small-time rustler becomes his drinking companion; and Chet Minor is too sodden with liquor and despair to pay any attention when Ben suggests that the crippling accident might not have been as accidental as it seemed. There were fresh marks of a whip, Ben says, on the horse's flank.

IT IS Barney Loveless, the tough, wise old owner of the Screwplate ranch, who finally brings Chet Minor back to himself. He puts Chet in charge of the Rock Creek camp, and there Chet is alone on land that he can pretend is his own. Gradually he recovers his strength, his interest in his work, and his self-respect. Part of the bitterness has left his mind because in a brief meeting with Maida Overman he has suddenly realized her hardness, her complete selfishness.

Chet Minor's only neighbors are nesters, despised by the cowman and feared because they are taking over the rangeland of the big ranches. But almost unwillingly Chet becomes the friend of one nester family—Doctor Laird and his attractive daughter Sally. In spite of his cowman's pride Minor helps them and other nesters in their struggle with a bleak and unfamiliar life. He will not admit to himself that his frequent visits to the Lairds are the result of a particular interest in the lovely Sally.

MEANWHILE, the big ranchers, led by Powell Overman, have determined to combat the menace of the nesters. They agree that the rifle must be their method; and they send out curt warnings to the nesters to get out of the country. Only Barney Loveless refuses to take part in the plan, for he foresees disastrous range war. But the ranchers cannot be deterred now, for lately there have been cattle stolen. The nesters are accused, though actually it is the work of Ben Revilla and a band of rustlers. Angered, the cattlemen move swiftly; a nester is shot as an object lesson.

Carl Olson asks Chet Minor to warn the

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ranchers that the nesters will fight back if the killings continue. Chet refuses; yet afterward he begins to realize how terrible this feud can become. And two other factors help to alter his decision: his friendship for the Lairds, and the note he receives—the same note every nester has received. So Chet tries to convince the sheriff that he must prosecute the nester's murderer, before the war gets completely out of control. But Sheriff Jim Clarke was elected by the cowmen and must obey them now. Defeated, Chet Minor sets out for his camp, knowing that Rifle Rock is a tinder-box soon to burst into flame. . . .

CHAPTER IX

SNIPER

CHET MINOR left Rifle Rock a little after one o'clock but the Rock Springs camp was dark when he rode in, Joe French having gone to bed long before. For the last part of his return trip Chet had a weak moon, heavily ringed with haze. That meant a storm. He was glad to see the black bulk of the cabin under the mesa, to hear the horses neigh and to see the pinpoint of light spring to life in the cabin as French got up and lit the lamp.

Chet unsaddled, turned his horses loose and went into the cabin. It was eleven o'clock, and he had been in the saddle about seventeen hours. Joe saw his weariness at once and asked no questions. That night Chet fell asleep immediately, scarcely realizing that Joe had left him the bunk and had bedded down beside the stove.

French asked a few questions about the trip to town, after breakfast had been disposed of the next morning. And while Chet answered them, he could see the amazement growing in Joe's eyes.

"They've brought a killer into the country," Chet said bitterly. "Hired somebody to do their dirty work. You sabe that, Joe?"

French nodded. "But I don't know why you'd side the nesters," he said.

Chet shrugged. "I don't either," he said slowly, "but I'd made up my mind to go to town before you brought me that letter. I didn't do a damned bit of good. Might have known that Clarke wouldn't listen to a cripple."

The bitterness and some of the old self pity was creeping into Chet's voice. Joe recognized it and was worried. "They'd listen to you if they would to anybody," he said. "Say Chet, when I get back to the ranch I'll talk to Barney. Maybe he can do somethin'. He's not in with the rest of the cowmen, you know. He—"

"Nobody's got on him yet," Chet interrupted. "Maybe Loveless will change his mind when he has some cattle stolen an' some land grabbed out from under him."

"Not Barney," French answered. "I know him."

Chet grunted disparagingly.

French helped him with the feeding and as a result, the work was done before noon. There were signs in the air of a storm coming.

"Makin' bag," Joe said, looking at the sky. "I'd better get back home, Chet."

He rode away toward the north, worried and anxious to talk with Barney Loveless. Chet had been right. Barney had not been stepped on yet by the encroaching settlers. Joe wondered if the old cowman would be as equable when some Screwplate cattle were missing. He had an idea that Barney would stick to the position he had taken.

Still the storm held off. Still, at night, the moon was ringed with haze and during the day the clouds hung lowering over the northern mesas. Chet, gloomily satisfied to be alone once more, went about his business. He rode, he did the chores, but he did not go down to Laird's and he had no company.

Two days after Joe French left, Chet finished feeding and drove the team and rack to the shed. He unhooked the team, stripped off the harness and put the horses up. He was keeping the work team in the shed and feeding them a little grain and plenty of hay. One horse was always in the corral and the others came in regularly from the pasture to be fed. Finished outside, Chet went to the house and saw that the water bucket was empty. The spring,

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being living water, did not freeze solid and so Chet had only thin ice to break. He picked up the buckets, went out and started around the corner of the cabin.

He had taken two steps beyond the corner when something smacked into the logs just beside his head, and up on the mesa a rifle cracked viciously. Chet dropped both buckets and sprang back. His short leg played him false, and he tripped at the cabin corner. He fell, and probably that fall saved his life for the rifle cracked again up on the mesa slope. Chet rolled around the corner of the cabin, scrambled up and ran for the door. Inside, he dropped the bar in place and stood panting.

CHET was no gunman. He had never shot at a man. But he was a fighter, and so now he acted instinctively and without panic. It was not with any deliberate thought that he caught up the rifle from beside the door and went swiftly across the room, nor did he plan a position of defense. Simply he had the rifle and was kneeling beside the window, his poised body quite free of tension, his eyes searching through the grimy glass along the slope of the mesa.

There was movement on the mesa slope. A pinon stirred, a cedar bent and sprang straight again. Chet Minor fired three times rapidly, once to the right, once to the left, and once squarely into the center of the cedar. The bullets crashed through the glass and powder smoke was acrid in the cabin. Chet dropped down from the window, leaning against the wall. The heavy logs of the cabin would stop any bullet. Only the window and the door were vulnerable spots.

Silence hung heavy as death over the Rock Springs camp.

Presently Chet moved. He peered cautiously out of the broken window. Nothing stirred on the mesa slope. He crawled beneath the window to the northern wall, pried out chinking with his knife and looked through the loophole he had made. The shed and the corrals were unchanged.

He smoked a cigarette as he moved from the window to the loophole on the north, to another that he made in the southern wall and to the latch-hole in the door. He saw the horse in the corral. He saw the pinons and the cedars on the mesa slope, the cleared ground where he fed the dry cows; he saw the long slope to the south—and nothing more.

The day grew dim. With night came the snow, great flakes that fell silently with no wind to blow them. Chet busied himself within the cabin. The window he barricaded. He stuffed rags into the loopholes, and he pulled the table over until it was close to the door so that it could be used for a barricade. These things he did and then, he put on his sheepskin and slipped out in the darkness to the shed.

There was water in the half-barrel. Chet broke the ice and let the team drink. At the corral he opened the pasture gate so that the horse within the fence could go out to the others and get to water. He scooped the buckets full of snow and took them to the cabin, careful lest they clink or rattle. There was wood enough in the cabin, but Chet brought the axe from the woodpile. Then he unstrapped the Colt from around the sheepskin and pulled off his coat.

The fire had died in the stove. Chet rekindled it, knowing that there was as much danger from the cold as from anything. He drank hot coffee after the fire had grown strong, and he ate cold biscuits and a piece of steak that he had fried at breakfast time. At intervals he listened, and heard nothing.

Chet did not light the lamp. As the night grew older, he heard the wind begin to rise and moan around the cabin. Chet dozed during the night, not sleeping but resting, ready for instant action, like a cocked weapon. With the gray light of morning he was fully awake. The storm was raging now and it had brought safety.

Chet pulled the table away from the door and looked out. Snow was drifted three feet high in front of the door; beyond was a blurry white mass of wind and fly-

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ing snow. Chet shrugged his shoulders, closed the door and methodically set about preparing a meal as though nothing had happened.

When he had eaten he thought of the work there was to do. He could not ride, but the horses would be in the corral and must be attended, and the team was in the shed. So Chet got on his outdoor clothes and went out.

THE mesa behind the Rock Springs camp formed a lea in the storm. The wind eddied and though the snow was thick, Chet could see the shed dimly. He walked toward it.

The horses were in the corral. Chet let them into the shelter of the shed. From shed to stack, from stack to shed he worked, feeding, carrying hay. He broke the ice that had formed in the half-barrel and filled it three times as the horses drank thirstily. He carried wood into the cabin, glad that he had cut so much when the weather was fine. Then, for the present, he was finished. Later, when the storm lessened, he would look after the cattle. Now to venture a hundred yards from camp was to invite death.

By ten o'clock a change had come in the wind; its whine was more urgent. When Chet looked out the door, he saw that the snow was finer and it stung against his face like tiny needle-pricks. Once more he donned his outer clothing and went out into the storm. This was bad. This was as bad as he had ever seen. This was the sort of blizzard that the old-timers talked about.

A brief survey showed that the horses were in the shed, sheltered from the wind, their breaths steaming. They must do without water now, for he dared not venture to the spring, close as it was.

As Chet started back toward the cabin an eddy in the wind caused momentary visibility. Chet could see, perhaps two-hundred yards away, a slight movement, something black against the snow.

It might be a cow, but it did not seem large enough. It might be a wolf, but the wolves and the coyotes would be bedded down in this blizzard, safe in shelter. In the lull Chet started toward that black object, plowing through the drifts. The storm shut down again. He could not see five yards. He stopped and then went on, the wind buffeting him, the snow biting into his cheeks. And then, suddenly he stumbled over something soft, and throwing out his hands as he fell, struck against a man's body.

The man was flat on his belly, but a slight movement showed that there was life in him. Chet got up. He caught with numbing fingers at snow-filled clothing, and started to drag the man back toward the cabin. For a long distance he struggled with his load; then suddenly fright possessed him. He should have reached the cabin by now. He had missed it.

Chet tried to pierce through the storm, and could not. He could see perhaps eight feet. He was panting and his breath froze upon the lifted collar of his sheepskin. His hands were numb. But once more he caught the man's coat and resumed his painful way.

The stackyard fence stopped him. He had been going directly away from the cabin. There were fences on either side of the cabin, and within some two hundred yards of fenced land Chet Minor was lost. But the stackyard fence gave him a point of departure. He turned his back to it and pushed ahead. Then abruptly, the cabin wall was in front of him, and relief flooded his mind.

CHAPTER X

THE WHITE APACHE

IT WAS only the work of moments now to reach the door, shove it open and pull his inert burden into the warmth of the room. Chet let the man lie on the floor while he forced the door shut. Then for a moment or two he leaned against the door, exhausted.

At length he bent to the man on the floor. He half-carried, half-dragged him to the bunk and stripped away the snow-

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packed clothing. The stranger was not a big man, hardly as large as Chet himself. There were compact, hard muscles under the clothing; the man's hands were so tanned that he appeared to wear gloves, and his face and neck were equally brown. These were the hands of a rider.

Chet rubbed the white body with a blanket, the rough wool rasping against the flesh. He laid the blanket over the naked man, put fresh wood in the stove and set the teakettle to boiling. There was no whisky in the Rock creek cabin, for Chet had not dared trust himself with whisky. But perhaps hot coffee would serve equally well. He returned to the rubbing. Presently the man on the bed breathed deeply and opened his eyes. He stared around the cabin and then the eyes, gray and wide, came to rest on Chet.

"Horse went down," the man on the bunk said hoarsely. "I tried to make it to shelter. Got lost."

"I'll have some hot coffee into you in a minute," Chet promised. "How'd you feel?"

A little smile came to the man's lips. "Like hell," he muttered.

In a moment or two Chet brought a steaming cup of coffee to the bed and stood by while the gray eyed man drank it.

"What time did your horse play out?" Chet asked.

"Last night." The stranger's voice was stronger now.

"An' you been comin' ever since? You were clear down when I picked you up."

"More coffee," the stranger said.

Chet filled the cup. When the coffee had been swallowed, the gray-eyed man sat up under the blanket. He grimaced with the pain of blood returning to his numbed muscles. "Just whereabouts did I get to?" he asked.

"This is the Rock Springs. I'm Chet Minor," Chet answered.

"My name's Ames." He held out his hand. "I'm obliged to you. Guess I wouldn't have made it if you hadn't picked me up."

"It's a rip-snorter outside," Chet said.

Ames nodded. "I found that out," he said ruefully. "You know, gettin' cold doesn't hurt except at first. It's the thawin' out that's tough."

"Well," Chet said, "you'll thaw after awhile. I'm goin' to cook some dinner." As he left the bunk, Ames' eyes went to the belt and holstered gun that lay on the floor where Chet had dropped them as he undressed the unconscious man. Ames looked at them a moment and then at Chet by the stove. The wind moaned around the corner of the cabin. Under the blanket Ames shivered.

Chet set about cooking, and awhile later he heard Ames say: "I'm thawin' out."

Then Chet brought a suit of his own underwear, a clean pair of Levi's and a shirt, and laid them on the bed. "Can't do much about boots," he said apologetically. "I got just the one pair."

AMES was dressed before the meal was ready. He went to the cupboard that stood in front of the window and peered around it. "Sure blowin'," he commented.

"Dinner's about ready," Chet said.

By three o'clock Ames' clothing was dry, his boots nearly so. He sat on the bed, sucking on a thin cigarette, watching Chet. There had been little talk during dinner or afterward when Ames had helped with the dishes.

"You got a nice place here," he said suddenly.

"Old line-camp," Chet said. "I'm homesteadin' it."

"Goin' to keep it?"

Instead of answering the blunt question, Chet said: "It used to belong to the Screwplate."

"You ride for the Screwplate?"

"I rode for the Triangle before I got hurt."

Ames got up and put the cigarette in the stove. "Looks like I'll be with you awhile," he announced.

"You'll have to stay until the storm blows out," Chet agreed. "I don't mind. It's lonesome here."

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"I reckon."

"I think I can make it to the barn," Chet said. "I want to look after the horses. If you want to, you can fill the buckets with snow an' put 'em on the stove to melt." He took his coat from a nail beside the door and pulled it on. Ames walked to the bench and poured the water in one bucket into the other.

"Don't take chances," he warned. "The storm's bad."

Chet put on his hat and opened the door. "I'll be right back."

When he came back in, Chet saw that Ames was melting snow in a bucket on the stove. Chet stamped snow from his boots and shook the flakes from his coat. "Seems to be lettin' up a little," he announced.

Ames had pulled on his still-damp boots to go out for the snow. Now he moved a box toward the stove, sat down, and extended his feet toward the heat. "They'll dry better on," he observed. "Funny, I never had a pair of boots till I was about twelve years old. Always wore moccasins." His voice was smooth, pleasant, drawling.

"I don't remember when I didn't wear boots," Chet said. "My dad got me a pair about the time I learned to walk, I reckon."

"I didn't have a dad to get 'em," Ames drawled. "Closest thing I ever had to a father was old Two Elk down on the Jicarilla reservation."

"Indian?" Chet asked.

"Apache," Ames corrected him. "He brought me up. It don't get cold down there like it does here. We don't have the snow."

He seemed to want to talk now. He hitched closer to the stove, his face impassive but pleasant, his eyes keen. "Looks like you were forted up," he observed, gesturing toward the cupboard in front of the window. "You got your window blocked an' I see you got some loopholes stuffed with rags."

"Had a shot taken at me last night," Chet answered, watching Ames narrowly. "Man just missed me."

"So?" Ames said.

Chet nodded. "Until the storm I thought he might come back."

"It would take a hard case to be out in this storm," Ames said. "I wouldn't worry if I was you."

Chet's eyes were still on Ames. "I don't worry," he returned.

"That's right."

"The Jicarilla is in Arizona, isn't it?" Chet asked.

Again the gray eyed man nodded. "South," he agreed. "I was born down in that country. They tell me my father was a missionary that came out to save the Indians. But the Apaches killed him."

"An' you lived with the Apaches?" There was disbelief in Chet's voice.

"Until I was about twelve," Ames said. "Two Elk adopted me. He'd lost his own kid. When I was twelve I tied up with a freightin' outfit. Of course I've been back an' forth on the reservation a lot since then. I've got a lot of friends there."

"Friends? An' they killed your father?"

"My mother too," Ames said. He was fashioning a cigarette as he answered. Looking up from the paper and tobacco, he smiled faintly at Chet. "I didn't hold it against the Apaches. That's just their way of gettin' along. It's kind of their trade, you might say."

Chet shook his head. "I don't quite sabe."

"Well," Ames explained, finishing the cigarette, "it's this way: An Apache lives by raidin', killin' people. You can't hold it against 'em. They're fair about it. They didn't hold it against me when I guided for Crook. That was the way I earned my livin'. Of course they tried to kill me an' I did for some of them, but when they were back on the reservation we were friends again. It was all right."

CHET sat down on the bed. He was beginning to understand this gray-eyed man who calmly smoked Chet's tobacco. "So when you fight that's just business," he mused, "an' when you don't fight you get along all right."

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"That's right." Ames nodded.

"Didn't they have it in for you for killin' some of them?"

"Mebbe some of the relations did," Ames drawled. "I don't know. I'd done it in the line of business, you see. An Apache don't think there's any harm in killin' a man."

"Well," Chet said, "maybe there ain't. I wouldn't feel good about it, though."

"Why not?" Ames' eyes were mildly curious. "What's wrong in killin' a man if he needs killin'?"

"Well . . ." Chet searched for words, "I don't exactly know. I reckon it's just that—"

"You ain't never killed a man," Ames surmised.

"No, I haven't."

"That's why you think like that." Ames shrugged.

"Damned if you ain't a cold blooded proposition!" Chet exclaimed. "You sit there an' talk about killin' a man like it was butcherin' a calf."

"Speakin' of cold"—Ames got up—"it's gettin' cold in here now. That window leaks some air. Where's the woodpile? I'll bring in some wood."

"I'll help you," Chet said. "You couldn't find the woodpile in this snow."

They went out together to return, snow plastered and laden with fuel. When again they removed their coats, Ames reached into a pocket and produced a deck of cards. "Ever play rummy?" he asked.

Chet said that he had. Ames placed the deck on the table and moved a box around until he faced the door. "Come on," he said. "I'll play you a game."

"There's nothing we can do outside," Chet said. "All right, I'll play you."

The two played rummy until it was time for supper. After the meal they went to bed.

By the following morning the snowfall had stopped but the wind was still blowing and it was bitter cold. Snow, lifted from the earth by gusts of wind, whipped against Chet and Ames when they went out to attend the horses. They played rummy for the remainder of the morning, but by noon the wind had dropped somewhat and Chet knew that he must do some riding. There were two hundred head of cows to look after and where they had been scattered by the storm, only the Lord knew. Of course the drift-fence south of Rock Springs would have caught some of them, but the rest would be in whatever shelter they had found and some might be hopelessly lost or even killed by the blizzard.

"I've got to make a little ride," Chet told Ames. "Can't go far this afternoon, but I've got to look around."

Ames nodded. "If you had a saddle I'd go with you," he offered.

"I've just got the one saddle," Chet said. "You'd better stay here. There'll be somebody down from the Screwplate as soon as they can get through, an' get their own work done."

"Well," Ames said, "I'll look after things around the house anyhow."

Chet dressed, belted the Colt around his sheepskin and took the Winchester when he went out to his horse. Ames watched these preparations, saying nothing. Chet rode off, looking back to see Ames down at the corral forking hay into the feed rack for the horses.

ALL through that bitter afternoon Chet rode, finding some cattle, bunching them and throwing them back toward the camp. He worked automatically for his mind was filled with other business than cattle. He had a shrewd suspicion about Ed Ames. The way the man talked, the casual way he spoke of killing, his arrival at the camp, his horse's being missing—all of these were facts that made Chet suspect the man. And yet the drygulcher who had shot at Chet from the mesa side must have pulled out before the storm struck, must have made for shelter. He would have been gone from the Rock Creek vicinity long before the snow struck down.

Chet pondered the thing over and finally shrugged his shoulders. At any event, Ames

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could not do him much damage. Chet had taken occasion, when the man was out of the house, to unload the Colt that Ames carried, and to strip the cartridge belt of shells. They were in the pocket of Chet's sheepskin at the moment.

No matter what Ames was, he was harmless right now and Chet, coming along slowly behind the little bunch of cattle he had collected, ceased to worry. He looked eagerly into the growing dusk for the pinpoint of light that would mark the Rock Springs cabin.

When Chet came in, Ed Ames had supper on the table.

For three days after the storm Chet worked from first daylight until night. During those three days he was thankful for the two young horses he had broken. They were stout and they could stand the gaff. The old horses played out. Good as they were, they couldn't buck the snow. Chet rode all three of the old ones one day, and the two young horses the next.

It was tough going. There were cattle along Barney Loveless' drift-fence. Chet picked them up and brought them in. Some were cows that he had been feeding, others were drifted down from above. The second day, coming in late, he nursed a bunch along as far as he could, dropped them and went back the next morning and brought them in.

During those three hectic days Ed Ames took Chet's place in the stackyard, feeding hay. Chet had almost two-hundred head when, about noon the fourth day after the storm, Joe French and Laramie came down from the ranch. Joe and Laramie had been enroute since six o'clock and they had horses with them.

The snow had hit as hard at the Screwplate as at the Rock Springs. It was all over the country, French reported. There would be a lot of cattle killed, perhaps more than cattle. Laramie and Joe threw down their beds and turned their horses into the corral while Chet rustled grub. Laramie looked oddly at Chet after he had been introduced to Ed Ames.

Ames explained that Chet had pulled him out of the snow. He didn't make a whole lot of it, but Chet could tell that Ames meant the praise he spoke. They ate and then the three riders left to see what they could do about bringing in more drifted cattle.

When they came in that night, Ed Ames was gone. There was a note for Chet on the table and the chores were done. The feed rack was filled and so were the water buckets. The note said:

I borrowed a horse and bridle. Will leave him in Rifle Rock. So long and thanks.

It was not signed. Laramie looked at Chet again, an intent expression on his face. "Know who you pulled out of the snow?" he asked.

Chet shook his head.

"Just the toughest man that's hit these parts, that's all," Laramie announced. "I knew about him in Wyoming before I came down here. He was a mine guard when they had a strike at Hanna. Run the guards for the company."

"Well," Chet said, "tough or not I couldn't let him lie out an' freeze, could I?"

"It might of been a good thing," Laramie said.

CHAPTER XI

NESTER'S MAN

THE three riders cleaned up after the snow. A lot of cattle had drifted down at Chet in the storm, and when they were brought in he had more cattle to feed than before the storm. They dug a few out of snowbanks and brought them in, and they found some cattle winter-killed. It was tough. Joe French, with Laramie's help, wormed information from Chet. They found out about the attack upon him. There was evidence around the cabin that they could not overlook, the loopholes and the shattered glass of the window.

"You think it was Ames that took that shot at you?" French asked bluntly.

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Chet shook his head. "I don't know," he answered. "I don't see how he could have. He came in the day after that happened. He'd of had to lay out all night if he was the one."

"He could do that," Laramie answered. "He's about half Injun. Injun raised, anyhow. I think I'll . . ." Laramie did not complete what he started to say. Laramie, Chet and Joe both knew, was dangerous. He had seen plenty of trouble.

French wanted to leave Laramie with Chet when he went back to the Screwplate. Chet dissuaded him, knowing that both men were needed at headquarters; and anyhow he felt that he could take care of himself. Unwillingly Joe took Laramie along when he left.

During the riding, Chet managed two things: He saw the Lairds and he took up his trapline. There was too much work now for him to attend his traps properly and he did not propose to leave them out. The Lairds were glad to see him, but his visit was brief. Chet simply wanted to reassure himself that the Lairds were not in need of help, and when he had done that he left.

After Joe and Laramie had returned to headquarters, it was easy for Chet to settle down once more into the old routine, feeding cattle, doing the chores, and always keeping a wary eye out for his own safety. It became second nature for him to keep under the ridges and off the skyline, to come into the cabin by varying routes.

March came, and with it thawing weather and winds that blew constantly, whining about the cabin, tugging at Chet as he rode, jerking the hay from his fork as he tossed it from the wagon when he fed. But March softened winter, broke it at last.

By the end of March calves were commencing to drop; under the brown grass the tender green was sprouting, and in the Rifle Rock the nesters were plowing.

The Rifle Rock was quiet with the temporary silence of a teakettle set on a hot stove. The kettle was not boiling—not yet.

As the weather softened and Chet had more daylight to work by, he started on the horses that Loveless had sent down. There were four green broncs and Chet, stake breaking them, began the wearisome process of their education into cow horses. By Earl Keelin, who brought down the horses, Chet sent a letter to the ranch, asking that it be given the bootmaker in town. Chet badly needed a pair of boots.

EARLY in April, returning to camp on a green horse that he was training, Chet saw a buggy tied to the fence in front of the Rock Springs camp. When he reached the corral and was stripping the saddle from his horse, Carl Olson and Dr. Laird came out of the house.

"Hello," Chet said, pulling the hackamore off the horse. "Been here long?"

"Not very long," Laird answered. "We came over to visit you, Chet, and made ourselves at home."

"That's right," Chet said, letting the horse go. "What's on your mind, Doc?"

"Let's go to the house," Laird suggested.

The three walked back to the cabin together. Chet put wood on the fire that had been built by his visitors, and slid the coffee pot forward on the stove so that it would heat. Olson had seated himself stiffly on a box and Laird took the one chair. As Chet sat down on the bunk, he realized there was a purpose to this visit and wondered what it might be.

"Chet," Laird said suddenly, "Olson and I had visitors yesterday."

"Yes?" Chet said.

The doctor nodded. "Mr. Overman and Mr. Neil, with a man named Ames and several others, called on us," he continued.

Chet's eyes were sharp as he fixed them on the doctor. "So?" he commented.

Laird smiled ruefully. "It seems that there have been some cattle stolen from Mr. Overman's ranch and Mr. Neil has missed some. I understand that they are visiting all the settlers in this region. They seem to think that we have been stealing cattle from them."

"Ames was along, huh?" Chet asked.

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"In an official capacity," Laird said. "I understand that he is a stock detective."

Chet made no comment, and Olson, shifting nervously on his box, spoke out. "We come to see you," he said bluntly. "We got a plan."

Chet rolled a thin cigarette. "Overman an' them didn't get up here. I didn't see 'em."

"Carl and I have been talking things over." Laird's eyes were bright. "We have an idea, Chet."

"Yeah?" Chet said, and lit his cigarette.

"We want you to run for sheriff next election."

Chet was startled. His eyes flashed from the doctor to Olson and back again. Suddenly he laughed. "That's rich," he said. "I couldn't be elected dog catcher in Rifle Rock."

The doctor's smile was amused. "I don't think you quite realize that this country has changed, Chet," he reminded. "You have a good many friends that you didn't have a few months ago."

"No"—Olson's voice was guttural—"we don't forget who helps us."

There was something about that big stolid man that made Chet suddenly become serious. "Election comes next fall," he said. "That's six months away. You—"

"It's not too early to begin talking," Laird interrupted. "Now Chet, don't say anything yet. Let me talk. Olson and I have thought this out."

Chet nodded and Laird went on. "You know that Ray Quick was killed. You know that a good many of the men who have come into the country were ordered out of it. Some of them have gone. There has been a good deal of trouble. Now the newcomers are being accused of stealing cattle. We want protection, Chet."

"Anybody does," Chet agreed.

"We think," Laird said, not noting the interruption, "that you are the man that can give it to us. We think that if you are in the sheriff's office we will have a man who will treat everyone alike. We're not asking favors, but just fair treatment. And we believe that if you will consent to run, we can elect you. There are quite a lot of us nesters, Chet!" The doctor was smiling as he spoke the last words.

Chet's face was somber. "I can't do it," he said. "I—well, I made a fool of myself when I came back to this country. The cowmen blackballed me. I've got this claim. Loveless wouldn't stand—" He broke off. There was no need of telling about the arrangement with Barney Loveless. "Anyhow," Chet concluded lamely, "if there's goin' to be trouble you'll need your protection right away. It won't do to wait till fall an' election time."

Again Laird and Olson exchanged glances. Olson cleared his throat. "We think that we can wait," he said. "If the sheriff knows that there will be a fight in the election, he will be careful. He will not let anything happen that would hurt his chances of being reelected."

"There's somethin' to that," Chet admitted. "You can do better than me, though. Why don't you run, Olson?"

"I would not make a good sheriff," Olson said stolidly. "I don't know enough an' I do not know the country."

Olson was right. Chet was forced to admit it. Conejos county was a hundred miles long and more than sixty miles across. The Rifle Rock took up more than half of it. What chance would a nester, a plowman, have in a range country? How could he enforce the law?"

"Don't say what you'll do yet," Laird urged. "Talk to Loveless before you make up your mind. Talk to French. They're friends of yours."

Again the doctor's eyes moved to Olson's face. Laird smiled faintly. He and Carl Olson had not come directly from their claims to the Rock Springs. Since early morning they had been in the doctor's buggy and among other places they had visited the Screwplate.

"Well," Chet agreed reluctantly, "I'll talk to Loveless, but I tell you right now I won't run. You'll have to get somebody else."

Laird got up. "We won't take that as

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final," he said. "We'll talk about this again. Carl and I have to go now if we're to get home before dark."

Olson too had risen and Chet got up from the bed and followed his guests to the door. "Doc," he said, as Olson and Laird went out, "you get the damnedest ideas. Just think of it. Me, runnin' for sheriff! It's funny!"

"Not nearly so funny as you think," Laird replied. "Goodbye, Chet. You think it over and come down and see us."

"I'll come down and see you but I won't think it over," Chet grinned. "So long, Doc. So long, Olson."

CHAPTER XII

BANKER AND BOOTMAKER . . .

BUT when Laird's buggy had rattled away Chet went back to the bed and sat down. Presently he shook his head. He had been right. There was no chance. Laird's idea was a joke.

It was not so humorous when, during the week, Barney Loveless came down to the Rock Springs. Barney went out with Chet and they looked over the cattle. They rode most of the country, talking about the calf crop, the grass, the water, the weather. Back at the cabin Barney estimated the amount of hay that was left and suggested that Chet need not feed any more. Chet said that he was only feeding a little bunch of weak cattle now. They talked over what had been done and what there was to be done; then Barney exploded a bombshell.

"Yo're goin' to run for sheriff next fall," he announced suddenly.

Chet grunted, as though he had been hit, and stared at the wrinkled little man.

"I mean it," Barney said.

"I couldn't be elected lamp-lighter in Rifle Rock," Chet announced. "You know—"

"You won't be runnin' for lamp-lighter," Loveless snapped. "I said sheriff!"

"But Mr. Loveless," Chet expostulated, "there's no use of even thinking about it. Why, Overman an' them blackballed me."

Loveless sniffed. "Powell Overman ain't Goddlemighty!" he snapped. "See here, Chet, the nesters are already talkin' about runnin' you. There's quite a bunch of nesters, too."

"But the cowmen . . ." Chet began.

"The cowmen are like a tail tryin' to wag a dog," Loveless announced. "Anyhow I'll back you an' I'm a cowman, ain't I?"

"Yes," Chet agreed, "but . . ."

"An' if I do there'll be more," Loveless announced.

"But what about the claim?" Chet asked. "I've got to live on it. I can't go galavantin' off an'—"

"Election's next fall," Loveless interrupted. "You'll have been on the claim six months. I'll advance the money an' you'll preempt it. Then I'll buy it from you."

Chet looked toward the cabin from the corral by which they stood. Loveless, watching with knowing eyes, saw that look and played an important card. "The sheriff's office pays nice money," he said shrewdly. "I'm spread out a lot, Chet. It might be that you could buy this place with what you'd make."

Chet shook his head. "I couldn't be elected," he said slowly.

"We'll find out about that in the fall," Loveless answered. "I want you to go with the wagon this year, Chet."

Chet looked at Loveless and raised his eyebrows inquiringly.

"Stevens an' me are goin' to run a wagon together," Loveless amplified. "Goin' to try it for a year."

Chet wondered as to the reason for the change. Heretofore the Screwplate had always thrown in with the Triangle wagon in the round-ups and Stevens had run a pack outfit to brand his calves.

"Most of the Bar O7 stuff an' mine don't get below the drift-fence," Loveless said. "We think we can put reps with the Triangle wagon an' do a better job of cleanin' up our own country by ourselves. Joe's goin' to run the wagon, but I'll pay you top wages."

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"I guess I can go, all right," Chet answered. "I've got to go into town. I got a pair of boots ordered. I'm pretty near barefooted."

"When will you go in?" Loveless asked.

"Next week."

"Better make it the middle of the week," Loveless said. "About Wednesday, say."

That was an order. Chet wondered why it had been given but said nothing. Barney Loveless always had a reason for his commands but he did not always state that reason.

"We're goin' to start the wagon the fifteenth," Loveless said. "That's two weeks off. You come up to the ranch the fourteenth an' be ready to go. Bring your truck up in the wagon. I don't want to leave it here."

"All right," Chet agreed.

There was some further talk concerning the green horses and the roundup arrangements, and Barney Loveless left for the Screwplate.

ON WEDNESDAY as Loveless had requested, Chet went to town. He had the remainder of his pelts with him on a pack horse for he wanted to dispose of the hides and not leave them at the cabin. He stopped at the Lairds on the way in to town but found the house was closed. Their buggy tracks were in the soft dirt of the road Chet followed, and half way between the claim and town Chet passed the buggy, waving to his neighbors.

Wolfbarger's store was the first place he stopped when he reached Rifle Rock and the first man he met in Wolfbarger's was Barney Loveless. Laramie was with Loveless and he grinned at Chet when he came in.

Barney came over while Chet disposed of his furs to the merchant and received payment. "What you goin' to do with that money?" he asked Chet.

"Take it to the bank," Chet said.

Loveless nodded. "I'll be around town," he announced. "See you before you pull out."

Chet left Wolfbarger's and went to the bank. There he met with an unusual reception. Stevens Claypool, ordinarily an austere individual, greeted Chet cordially, accepted the deposit himself and invited Chet into his little glassed-in office. There he gave Chet a cigar and gestured toward a chair. Chet sat down wonderingly.

"I hear you're going to run for sheriff in the fall," Claypool announced, lighting a match and holding it out to Chet. "That's fine, Chet."

So surprised was Chet that he almost forgot to puff on the cigar. "Why . . ." he began. "Why . . ."

"I've already written to Jones in the bank at Conejos," the banker interrupted. "He has just answered my letter. I told Jones that we would support their candidates for assessor and clerk if they would support you for sheriff. Jones was agreeable."

"But," Chet expostulated.

"I know it is early," the banker continued, "but I believe in getting a candidate's name before the public. We'll nominate you this fall and elect you sure. There's a good deal of sentiment against Clarke. He's done nothing about that man Quick's being murdered."

Chet shook his head. Things were coming a little fast for him.

"Now don't do much talking," Claypool advised. "Leave that to your friends, Chet. Come in and see me whenever you're in town and I'll keep you posted on how things are going."

Chet got up from his chair. Claypool rose and put his hand on Chet's shoulder, ushering the dazed young man out of the office. "Don't worry a bit," Claypool said. "We'll look after your interests here in Rifle Rock."

Chet did not know whether he was afoot or riding as he went up the street. Across the street Barney Loveless and Joe French, with Laramie loitering behind them, watched Chet's progress.

"Claypool kind of jolted him," Loveless chuckled. "Look at the way he walks." The three men laughed. Barney Loveless owned a quarter of the stock in Stevens'

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bank and was its biggest depositor. He had done a little missionary work with Stevens Claypool.

Chet went to the bootmaker's. His boots were ready and while he tried them on the gnome-like little man watched to see how his handiwork stood the test. The boots fitted and Chet paid for them. As the bootmaker made change, he asked:

"Is that right about yore comin' out for sheriff next fall?"

"Where'd you hear that?" Chet demanded.

"Everybody's talkin' about it," the bootmaker said. "It's about time somebody from Rifle Rock was elected. Clarke's had it long enough. He ain't done nothin' about that murder an' he ain't been able to stop the rustlin'. The Triangle an' the Rockin' Chair an' the Gunhammer, all three of 'em, have been losin' cattle."

"Well . . ." said Chet, surprise in his voice.

"I'm for you if you want to run," the bootmaker announced. "There'll be a lot more for you too."

GOING down the street, Chet encountered the nester, Burgess. Burgess, too, stopped him and questioned him about his running for sheriff. Carl Olson, Burgess said, had talked to him and to a lot of the nesters. They were all for Chet.

Chet was beginning to feel sort of weak. Here was a full-fledged political boom and he was the object of it. He crossed the street and stopped; Loveless had called to him. He waited while Loveless, Joe French and Laramie came toward him.

As he stood waiting for his friends, a buggy passed by. Maida Overman held the reins and beside her was a man whom Chet had never seen before, a well dressed stranger obviously from the East. Chet followed the buggy with his eyes, but he was examining his own mind. For the moment he had forgotten Stevens Claypool and the bootmaker and Burgess. He had seen Maida Overman and, oddly enough, had experienced no feeling whatever. It was just as though he had seen a total stranger.

"Where you headed, Chet?" Loveless asked as he came up.

"I was goin' to the Staghorn," Chet answered honestly. "I felt like I needed a drink."

Loveless' eyes were sharp. "I'll buy you a beer," he offered.

"That's just what I was goin' to get," Chet answered.

In the Staghorn the four arrayed themselves in front of the bar and nodded to Vance Murray and Jim Clarke who were talking with Alec Crow and young Tom Neil further down.

Otto Hahn served the beer. "How are you, Chet?" he asked, pushing out the glasses.

"Good," Chet answered, sipping beer.

"I hear talk that you're goin' to run for sheriff," Otto said, glancing from the corners of his eyes toward Clarke and the others with him. "That right?"

"I . . ." Chet began.

"You bet he is," Barney Loveless said swiftly. "We're goin' to win with him, too."

Chet gulped at his beer.

"It's time," Loveless said, grinning wickedly, "that we had some law enforcement around here."

Clarke pushed his way from the bar and came toward Chet. Barney stepped back so that no one was between the two. Behind Clarke, Murray and Neil and Crow stood, their faces sullen with resentment.

"So you think you'd make a better officer than I do?" Clarke demanded, scowling at Chet.

Suddenly Chet was cool. He met Clarke's eyes and did not turn away. "Have I said so?" he asked.

Clarke for the moment was taken aback. "I've been sheriff of this county a long time," he blustered. "If you think . . ."

"I'm beginning to think you've been sheriff too long a time," Chet said quietly. "I haven't said I'd run, Clarke."

"But yo're goin' to!" Clarke snapped.

"Now that you're askin', I am!" It

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seemed suddenly to Chet as though things clicked into place. He was sure now.

"If you think yo're so damned good I'll give you a chance," Clarke rasped. "I'll make you a deputy an'—"

"Just what Chet wants," Barney said cheerfully. "Get out the badge an' the commission, Clarke."

"Jim!" Alec Crow's voice was hard. "Don't be a damned fool!"

"You wouldn't call Jim a fool for makin' a good man deputy, would you now, Alec?" Loveless asked innocently. "We need another deputy up here. The job's too big for Vance to handle."

"Jim!" Alec Crow said again, paying no attention to Loveless.

Clarke turned. Crow was shaking his head, frowning.

"Well," Loveless said cheerfully, "you was goin' to make Chet a deputy, Jim."

"I won't do it!" Clarke said suddenly. "Think I'm a fool?"

"I know yo're a fool," Loveless said complacently. "Come on, boys. We'll go if you finished yore beer."

Silently the four Screwplate men filed out of the Staghorn, Laramie lingered last, his eyes on Clarke and Neil and Crow. Out on the street Barney Loveless began to laugh. "Won't that make talk?" he chuckled. "Ain't that somethin' for the campaign? So yo're goin' to run after all, Chet?"

"You crowded me into it," Chet said angrily.

Barney continued to laugh. Reluctantly Chet began to smile. "Wasn't Jim Clarke hot?" he said.

"We'll make him a lot hotter," Loveless prophesied. "Let's get out of town. Are you through, Chet?"

Chet said that he was finished and crossed the street to where he had left his horses. Laramie, Loveless and Joe French went on to the livery barn for their horses. It was apparent that they had stayed in town all night. Chet wondered why, then he grinned. It was just like Barney Loveless to do this. The little cuss had come to town with just this idea.

Laird's buggy was in front of Wolfbarger's, the doctor and Sally just alighting. Laird spoke to Chet and went on into the store, but Sally lingered a moment on the sidewalk.

"Took you a long time to get to town," Chet said, as he came up to Sally. "You must have stopped."

"We went to the Triangle," Sally said. "Dad wanted to see Mr. Overman."

Chet's eyebrows lifted. Now what business could Dr. Laird have had with Powell Overman?

"Dad is worried," Sally explained. "He has something on his mind. Did he say anything to you when he came up to see you, Chet?"

Chet shook his head.

"Maybe it's that woman over by Amarilla mesa," Sally said thoughtfully. "Dad has been going over there to look after her. Are you going to run for sheriff, this fall, Chet?"

"Fall is a long way off," Chet answered, "But it looks like I might."

Sally gave his arm a slight pressure with her hand. "I'm glad," she confided. "I've got to go in now. Dad's waiting."

CHAPTER XIII

ROUNDUP

ALL through the Rifle Rock men were busy that May. The nesters were planting, trying to get corn in before the middle of the month. The kids were out in the fields with their fathers, and sometimes the women came to help. On the ranches also there was activity. Summer horses were brought in for the remuda, wagons were mended, tires shrunk on wheels, grease applied to the skeins; harness patched, riveted or sewed. Supplies were coming out from town. Forges flamed where some cowhand, impressed as blacksmith, mended an iron. In the corrals, horses were thrown and shoes tacked on their hind feet so that there would be no cripples in the rocky country. All the Rifle Rock was at work and the Triangle was no exception.

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Powell Overman was at the Triangle, a dissatisfied, worried Powell Overman with only half his mind on his work. He had not come to the ranch because he wanted to, but because he must; and Maida was not with him. She was entertaining Norville Kirkpatrick at the town house.

Just after the blizzard in February Mark Scotia had died, and all the weight of the Triangle had come to settle on Powell Overman's shoulders. That was no inconsiderable thing. While Scotia was alive Powell had not worried greatly, but now the troubles were his own and there were many of them.

First the Drovers' Bank in Kansas City had been forced to take over the Triangle shares it held as security for eastern loans. Scotia's shares were still intact and in Maida's name, but the bank now held almost as much stock as Maida. Then, late in March, Kirkpatrick had come to Rifle Rock to look after the bank's interest in the ranch. And Kirkpatrick had stayed an unreasonable length of time. The business was finished and still Kirkpatrick lingered, and that brought a scowl to Powell Overman's face.

Overman visited his wife in her bedroom the morning of the day he was leaving for the ranch to stay throughout roundup. He had eaten his breakfast alone in the big dining room, for Maida did not come down to breakfast and Kirkpatrick had not yet risen. The big ranchman found Maida sitting up in the bed, propped by frilly pillows, her eyelids heavy and her face still flushed from sleep.

"I'm goin' to the ranch, Maida," Powell said awkwardly. "I can't stay in town any longer. Are you comin' out?"

Maida shook her head. "I don't want to go to the ranch," she said.

"I hate it out there. It's so inconvenient."

"How long is Kirkpatrick goin' to stay?" Powell asked abruptly. "Did he tell you?"

Again Maida shook her head. "He's taking a vacation," she said.

"Well," Powell said sullenly. "I wish he'd go home. We've been over everything an' there's nothin' more that he needs to do here. I wish he'd go."

"He's having a good time," Maida said.

"It was a mistake bringin' him here to the house," Powell announced. "It won't look right, me bein' at the ranch an' him here in town with you. People'll talk."

"Let them!" Maida snapped the words. "I don't care what people say. You've got to be nice to Norville, Powell. You must remember that he represents the bank and that they have a big interest in the ranch."

"That ain't any reason for him stayin'," Overman persisted stubbornly. "If you wasn't so nice to him he'd pull out."

Maida scowled. "I suppose you think I'm having an affair with him," she said sharply. "Well, certainly you're the last man on earth to talk. After I've had to let Rosa go because of the way you carried on with her, I suppose you think—"

"Please, Maida," Powell's face was flushed as he interrupted. "I thought we'd settled all that. I'm not sayin' anything about you an' Kirkpatrick. I . . ."

"Well I hope not!" Maida flashed. "Mr. Kirkpatrick is a good friend and that is all. Now you'd better go, Powell. Remember that I own most of the Triangle. You're the manager."

There was a threat there and Powell Overman heeded it. "I'll go then," he said, not able to keep the anger from his voice. "I suppose you an' your good friend will come out an' visit us while we're brandin'?"

"Norville will probably want to see the roundup," Maida admitted. "We may come out. Goodbye, Powell."

She turned her cheek toward her husband and awkwardly he kissed it. At least the pretense of affection was kept up in the Overman family.

"Goodbye, Maida," he said, and went out of the room. Maida Overman heard her husband's boots clumping on the stair. She smiled a small secret smile. Later, joining Kirkpatrick in the dining room, Maida pulled her lacy negligee about her and smiled provocatively up at the man.

"Powell had to go to the ranch," she

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said. "And so he's leaving me all alone."

"Not all alone, my dear," Norville Kirkpatrick said. "I'm still here, you know."

"But you'll have to go back to Kansas City," Maida said, "and then I *will* be alone. And—"

"I'll not leave while your husband is gone," Kirkpatrick interposed. "Certainly I'll not leave you."

Maida clapped her hands together softly. "Norville, I think you're the nicest man I've ever known."

"Just nice, my dear?" Norville Kirkpatrick's eyes were calculating.

"Oh," said Maida Overman, "you're . . . more than nice, Norville!"

CHET MINOR went up to the Screwplate on the fourteenth of May, as Barney Loveless had desired. He found there that the three men Clyde Stevens hired on the Bar O7 were already at the ranch. These three, with Chet, Joe French, Laramie and Earl Keelin, comprised the wagon crew. Jesse Lauder had been sent down to the Triangle to represent Loveless there.

It was a small crew for the country and the work there was to handle. Amador was going along to cook and both Loveless and Clyde Stevens would visit the wagon, but they could not be constantly with it. Stevens and Loveless were too old to stand up under the grueling work, and then too they had other interests to occupy their time. Take a day-jingler and a night-hawk out of this bunch and this would be a mighty short handed crew, Chet thought.

Later in the day it was augmented. Ben Revilla came in and after him Sven Olson, Carl Olson's oldest boy. The kid was grinning all over, on his first step toward his ambition, to become a cow puncher. Barney Loveless had taken Sven on as day wrangler.

That day the final preparations were made and early on the morning of the fifteenth the wagon pulled out from the ranch, the riders helping Sven along with the remuda and Laramie driving the bed wagon. Laramie was to act as night-hawk, and Chet wondered why Joe French had put so good a man on that job. They pulled the wagons down across country all that day and the next, going clear to the east side of the Rifle Rock and skirting around the point of Tramparas Mesa. The night of the second day Pete McGrath joined them, coming up from the Triangle, and Pearl Suplan rode in to represent the AC.

In the morning Joe French took his crew out on the first circle. Joe kept Chet with him while he dropped the others off; the two rode the circle together. They brought in the drive they had gathered and threw it into the herd on the bed ground. When the last of the gathers had come down, three men stayed to hold the herd and the rest went to the wagon to eat a hasty meal. Sven brought in the horses; he threw them into a rope corral formed by the wagons and saddle ropes, held by men who closed the gap after the horses were in.

Joe French did the horse roping, pulling out the mounts that were called for and turning them over to the riders. Horses were pulled out for the men at the herd, and wagon-wheeled. Sven having eaten his dinner, riders went out to relieve the men holding the cattle and they came in, changed saddles and ate. Then, while Sven took the remuda out again, the crew went back to work.

Laramie, as night jingler, tended irons and the fires that he had kindled. Chet was given the roping to do while Joe French ear-marked the calves and kept tally. Two men were put to hold the herd and the rest made flanking and branding crews. Chet, riding a fresh horse into the herd, was a little nervous. He had not done any roping for a long time.

Selecting a calf with a Screwplate cow, he shook out his loop. His wise old horse maneuvered for position, the calf took a step, Chet's rope flipped out and he came out from the herd, standing off in his left stirrup, the horse dragging the calf and the anxious cow following her bawling offspring. McGrath caught the rope, Ben

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Revilla the calf's tail. A jerk, and the calf was down. Ben sat down on it; McGrath put a knee on the calf's neck and held its head.

"Screwplate," Chet said.

Joe French bent down, straightened with a bloody knife in his hands and put a bit of ear cartilage in his pocket. Revilla had freed Chet's rope and Chet was on his way back to the herd. Earl Keelin applied a hot iron and the calf bawled while hair sizzled.

"Let him go," Keelin directed.

The calf struggled up. Ben Revilla waved his hat and the cow and the branded calf trotted off to the herd. Around the branding ground the cow ponies stood in a tired semicircle, watching with bored eyes.

WHEN they finished with the herd, Suplan and McGrath rode through and then rejoined French, taking their tally from him and checking it against the bits of bloody hair that he took from various pockets. Amador had come with a bucket to collect a mess of mountain oysters. Suplan and Chet, with the men who had done the holding, gave the cattle a shove back into the country that had been worked.

Joe French and the rest were riding back toward the wagons where now the supper fire crackled. The remuda was coming in, young Sven Olson straight as a ramrod in his dilapidated saddle, bringing up the rear. The sun was setting beyond the western mesas and on the branding grounds a fire died in a trickle of smoke and the last dust from the departing herd settled down. All over the range country that scene had been enacted that day. The West was at work, pursuing its business.

Chet Minor was tired. After supper, after the horses had gone out, he got his bed out of the wagon and unrolled it. The fire was pleasant and the odor of cigarette smoke good; the voices were a low murmur, broken by the rattle of the dishes as Amador cleared out the wrecking pan. At that moment Chet Minor would not have traded places with any man in the world.

The next day the crew worked another circle from the same bedground, branding in the afternoon. The morning after that they moved; they worked cattle as they rode and gathered on the Corbellus flats, still to the east of Tramparas mesa. That night, coming in from the herd, they found a visitor at the fire. Ed Ames, smiling pleasantly, walked out to meet the riders.

It was a shock to Chet Minor to see the compact smiling man. He had, for the time, forgotten all about Ed Ames and the trouble deep beneath the surface of the Rifle Rock.

Ames ate supper with the Screwplate crew. It was noticeable that he was the last man to go up the line to fill his plate and that he took a seat at the outside edge of the circle, with no man behind him. Ames gave no explanation of his presence and none was asked. He rode away after supper, thanking French for the hospitality.

Twice that night Laramie quit his horses and rode a circle around the camp, and again, when morning was gray, he sought a vantage point and looked over the country. Chet did not know of that, nor did he take notice of the rifle that Joe French carried in a saddle scabbard when they went out on circle in the morning coolness. How was Chet to know the thing that Barney Loveless had told Joe French?

"He'll be safer with the wagon, Joe," old Barney had said. "You take care of him. They tried to get to him once an' now, with this talk about him runnin' for sheriff comin' up, they'll try their luck again."

Joe French had nodded, and Laramie had reached inside his shirt and there touched the gun in his hidden shoulder holster.

ED AMES went south. For two hours he rode and then he halted. He hobbled his horse and in a little depres-

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sion of the prairie he placed his saddle blanket and covered it with his slicker. He lay upon that scanty bed and slept while his hobbled horse grazed near by.

In the morning he saddle and went on toward the south, passing by the black bulk of the Rifle Rock, until from a rise he saw the Triangle wagon below him. Ames rode in to the wagon and had some food. Afterward he asked: "Which way did Overman go?" When the cook had told him, Ames rode away once more.

Two miles from the wagon he found men and cattle. Powell Overman joined him and they rode on together until they were out of sight. Then Ames dismounted and squatted on one booted heel, the bridle reins trailing from his hand. Powell Overman stood beside him.

"Well?" said Overman.

Ames looked up. "There's not a chance," he said. "They're keepin' him covered. That Laramie circles around the camp at night an' French is always with Minor, packin' a rifle on his saddle."

"I thought you were tough!" Overman snapped. "I thought you'd take a chance."

"I'll take a chance," Ed Ames drawled without rancor, "but I'm no damned fool."

Overman scuffed the toe of his boot across the ground. "That damned doctor," he said, "is all over the country, talkin' Minor up for sheriff. He's stirrin' up the nesters an' so is that big fellow Olson. You wouldn't have any trouble settlin' Laird."

Ames shook his head. "I'll kill no doctors," he said. "Doctors an' preachers are out of my line."

"Why?" Overman asked curiously.

"Because," said Ed Ames, "when one of them is killed the whole damn' country gets up an' goes to war. That's why."

"Well then," said Powell Overman, "what are you hired for?"

"You hired me," Ames answered slowly. "You ought to know. I'll look over that Olson for you."

"Do that!" Overman ordered. "I'll have to talk to Mitchell an' Crow. Hell, I thought you could do the job."

"If you've got doubts," said Ed Ames, "you can always let me go."

"I'll talk to Crow an' Mitchell," Overman decided. "We're goin' to the Rifle Rock from here. You can find me there when you've got somethin' to tell me."

"All right," Ames answered. "An' remember, Overman, I come to this country because I was asked an' the agreement was I was to work my own way. You've had some nesters pull out, an' any time you ain't satisfied I can roll my bed."

Powell Overman shook his head. "I'm just upset, I guess," he said. "All this stir-up about Minor, an' with Laird talkin' . . . Damn him!"

The rage in Overman's voice made Ames stare. But he said nothing. He arose from his bootheel, put a rein over his horse's neck and mounted.

THE roundup wagons moved on across the Rifle Rock valley, following the old trails—dim, indistinct roads in the grass, that buffalo had made, or copper-skinned riders. Behind the wagons were branded calves, reaching around to lick at scabs on ribs or rump. Now June was beginning; the heel flies along the vegas buzzed viciously and tanned men became the color of old saddles.

Joe French stood at the tail gate of the hoodlum wagon and talked to Barney Loveless who was visiting the roundup. "We'll be through next Christmas, the way we're goin'," he said. "Barney, we got a lot of cattle winter-killed and there's some few just plain missin'."

"You'll be through by the end of June," Barney Loveless answered. "Sure, there's some cattle missin'. You didn't think they'd overlook us, did you? Where do you go from here?"

"Over toward the Rock Springs. Ben Revilla's quit, Barney. He wants his time."

"I've brought all the checks down," said Barney Loveless. "Give Ben his time if he wants it. I'll pick up a man in Rifle Rock to take his place."

"We could use about four more," Joe French said.

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Barney snorted and walked over to the buckboard to get the checks.

And so the roundup moved west across the valley, sweeping the country. That night after Barney left they were camped above Rock Creek, perhaps ten miles from Laird's. Sven Olson asked French if he could ride down home. He wanted to get some clothes, and he wanted—although he did not say this—to exhibit himself before the awed eyes of his younger brothers and sisters.

"Sure," agreed Joe, "you can go tomorrow, Sven. You've made a pretty good hand an' I'll let you off a day."

Sven left in the morning, and the wagon crew, a man short, rode their circles and threw a herd together. They were fortunate for they had a wire corral to brand in that day, a corral built at a spot called the Mule Pens, and so the absence of Sven did not noticeably slow them down.

Along in the afternoon, when the branding was well under way, Barney Loveless came back to the wagon on his return trip from Rifle Rock. Barney came out to the corral and Joe French laid off his job to talk to the boss.

"Come past the Triangle wagon," Barney said, talking across the wire fence to Joe. "They've made pretty good time. Overman wasn't there, but I talked to his strawboss an' they've lost a lot of cattle, winter-killed an' missin'."

Joe grunted. "We've lost some ourselves," he reminded the other. "Not so many, though, when you come to think about it."

"Did Ben pull out?" Barney asked.

"Goin' tomorrow," Joe said.

"The best I could do for a man to take his place was a fellow named Hall that's homesteaded down below here," Barney announced. "He says he's punched a few cows."

"You goin' on to the ranch or are you goin' to stop with us tonight?" Joe asked.

"I guess I'll stop," Loveless decided.

"Then we can talk after supper," said the foreman. "I'll go back to work now."

Loveless climbed into his buckboard and drove back to camp.

DOWN below the mule pens a man lay on the rim of the creek bank, hidden by the willows. He had a rifle pushed out before him and his eyes were steady on the board shack below him in the creek bottom. Ed Ames had been there on the creek bank most of the day, patient, with an Indian's ability to wait, watching with all an Indian's concentration.

Ames had seen the youngster, Sven, come riding in to the claim. He had seen the family greet the boy's arrival. He had seen Mrs. Olson come out of the house and pass back and forth, and he had watched the children as they went upon unknown errands. But Ames had not seen Carl Olson.

Carl Olson was confined to his bed with an infected foot. Ames surmised that something was wrong with him for Dr. Laird's buggy had come down the creek and the doctor had gone into the house with his medicine bag. He had come out after a time and under the eyes of the silent watcher in the willows, he had driven away toward the southwest, toward Amarilla Mesa. Still Ed Ames waited. There was just the chance that Carl Olson would come out of his house.

But as sundown approached the watcher on the bank lifted his rifle and slid back more deeply into the willows. Rising there, he progressed afoot to where a thicket spread toward the higher ground. From that thicket he took his horse and rode away, back toward the east and the Rifle Rock. He kept down below the ridges as he rode, watching the country narrowly.

And now another rider appeared from the west, silhouetted black against the sun, a man who pushed his horse along urgently—Ed Ames reined in.

"Overman," he said, half aloud. "Wonder what he's doin' over here? I wonder now."

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK

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LEGENDS OF THE LEGIONARIES

ORIGINS OF THE CUSTOMS AND SAYINGS OF THE FIGHTING-MEN : by W·A·WINDAS

·DEAD MARINES·

This term became a synonym for empty liquor bottles in the days of hard drinking at sea. It originated when King William IV (then Duke of Clarence) at an official dinner ordered the waiters to "take out those marines," indicating the empty bottles on the table. A major of marines in-dignantly asked, "Why does your Highness give the name of my honorable corps to an empty bottle?" "Because," replied William, with ready wit, "they are good fellows who have done their duty, and will do it again."

GROUND-HOG · DAY ·

Just the doughboy's slang for Armistice Day because "everybody came out of his hole".

·KIDNAP LAWS·

Even in the dark ages, no tolerance was held for kid-naping. A very old book of military regulations says "No child shall be held for ransom not even if he be rich."

·CONSTABULARY·

Today, a name used for any territorial police force (mounted or otherwise), it had its origin in the Middle Ages when cavalry was divided into groups called "constabularies".

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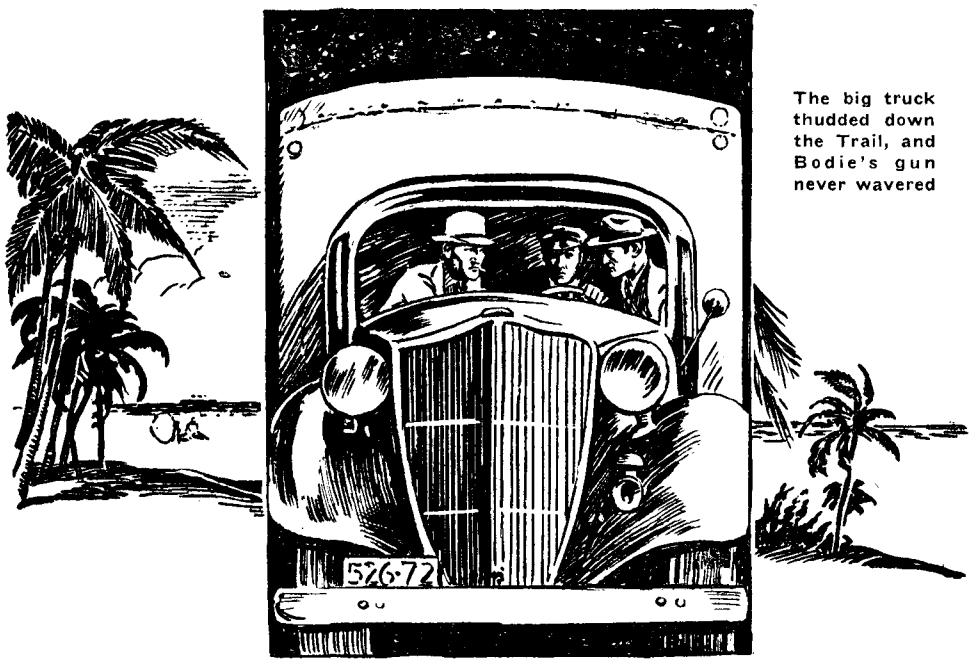

The big truck thudded down the Trail, and Bodie's gun never wavered

Angel Sharks

By WILLIAM BYRON MOWERY

Author of "The Tawny Peril," "The Man from Laramie," etc.

That's what they call those hard-faced alien-runners, most dangerous of all the smugglers that ply the Gulf by night; and any respectable trucker would have kept clear of them if he could. Sleet Travic couldn't—and that's how he brought a dead man to justice

WITH a cargo of cheap rustic settees, Sleet rolled the Cracker Barrel out of Fort Myers just after dusk, and hit the Tamiami Trail for Tampa.

Past the last royal palm of the outskirts, he pushed the Barrel up to forty-five per and held her there. Two years of gipsying up and down the Gulf Coast had taught him that forty-five miles was much faster than seventy, and that his good reputation with the road cops, citrus inspectors and other flat tires in a trucker's life, was a valuable asset to the *Cracker Barrel Lines*.

It was Hallowe'en. Despite the vast difference between Halstead Street and this half wild, half tropical land, the night reminded Sleet of his boyhood Hallowe'ens in Chicago. A blood-red moon was inching above the eastern horizon; and high-flying V-formations of long-necked cranes, like bevies of witches riding their broomsticks, were drifting down the night sky toward the Maya swamps of Yucatan.

A sour way to be spending Hallowe'en, Sleet thought, wishing he were out on the loping phosphorescence of the Gulf, with Leda. But such was a gipsy-trucker's life. Somewhere to somewhere. Grabbing loads

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where you could, and thankful for 'em. Dodging tipsy tourists and idiot cows on lonely night roads, Tampa to Kissimmee, Paloma to Arcadia, Venice to Miami. Fighting to build the *Cracker Barrel Lines* into something more respectable than one slightly used clipper-truck and one slightly disgusted driver.

A few miles north of Venice a truck flare slowed Sleet down, and he ground to a stop at a roadside jook-place where a flashlight was waving peremptorily. Sheriff Ralph Panky flipped a light into the cab.

"Oh, it's you, Sleet."

"Hello, Sheriff," Sleet said, wondering. It was unusual for Panky to work the Trail, especially with two deputies at his elbow. "What's up this evening?"

"Just routine yanking," the sheriff replied, *too* casually. He asked Sleet no questions, made no move to inspect the Barrel.

Nice to have a reputation like that, Sleet thought. Saved time, argument, and made a fellow feel good. But, damn it all, a person couldn't eat reputation, pay road bills with it, or furnish a bungalow in Paloma. Honesty, hustle and dependability always put a person out in front—in a pig's eye!

"Sleet," Panky said, "here's a hot tip for you. The Paloma Farms Produce have a dandy opening for a trucking service up 41 through Atlanta to Chattanoog' and Nashville—"

"You know only half that story, Pank. A hardware distribution job, out of Knox and Chattanoog', down through Jax to Tampa and this Gulf Coast, is lying wide open. Steady loads going and coming—it's a honey of a setup."

"Grabbing it?"

"With what?" Sleet pulled out an empty pocket eloquently. "That setup would require two big clippers besides this old Barrel."

"Hmmm. But can't *you* find backing somewhere?"

"Where? I could get the clippers okay; the Fyett Motors in Tampa offered to float me. But there's insurance, licenses, tags, bond money and other assorted miseries to the tune of three thousand non-existent bucks."

"Too bad," Panky sympathized. He waved Sleet on up 41. "Luck, son."

IN PALOMA, Sleet stopped at the Dew Drop Inn and walked into the little tavern. There were several truckers and a dozen tourists in the place. Over the tobacco stock case Sleet glimpsed a mass of shimmering auburn hair, where the capable manager of the Dew Drop was making a cigarette inventory.

"Lee—"

The mass of auburn jerked in surprise. From behind the case a girl rose up, a slim girl of twenty-three, sun-tanned, her body as bewitching as a dancing *señorita's*.

"Alone tonight, Lee?"

The auburn mass nodded. "The others wanted off, so I stuck. You had a run tonight anyhow." She raised her voice. "Sleet, there's a heavy box in the storeroom I can't manage."

Sleet stepped into the storeroom with her. When the door swung to behind them, Leda was in his arms, standing tiptoe for his hug and kiss. As she ran her fingers through the waves of his hair, "Sleet, could we maybe go to the dance Wednesday night at Cortez Beach?"

"Darn all, I'm—uh, fighting in Tampa Wednesday night, Lee. The semi-final bout at Benjamin Field."

"Sleet! Haven't I told you not to fight any more?"

"But this is an easy spot, honey. Six rounds with Dick Sanchez. It's sixty bucks, and the Barrel hasn't been making road bills lately."

"Well, this time, if you must; but after this fight, throw your gloves into the Gulf, honey—please."

Sleet evaded definite answer. Secretly he was planning to get into training and box all that winter. A tap-dance boxer with a startling right swing, he was popular with the "Grapefruit Circuit" crowds, and promoters wanted him on their cards.

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He didn't like cauliflower ears, gristle lips, busted knucks; and he dreaded the slightest touch of slap-goofiness; but he figured that by choosing his spots carefully, fighting semi-finals often instead of main bouts once a month, he could clear two thousand during the tourist season; and that was more than the Barrel could net in two forevers, the way things were going.

He said nothing about it to Leda, as they went back to the counter room. There'd be an argument, and he felt low enough already.

"Anybody phone in about loads for me, Lee?"

"That one to Orlando tomorrow night is all, Sleet. Haven't you anything out of Tampa?"

"I'll rustle something," Sleet said, with optimism he did not feel. "Guess I'll have to be pounding on, Lee."

From the cab, outside, he saw Leda standing by the window, framed by the Hallowe'en decorations. She looked lonely, tired. He felt ashamed that he could not afford marriage and a place of their own. Damn gipsying! After two years of working his heart out, a cup of coffee was a luxury, a home was a day-dream.

Under the red moon he headed north, through the soft Florida night.

FIVE miles beyond the Manatee River he was flagged again. Edwin Wilkins, a citrus maturity man, stepped onto the running board. At Wilkins's shoulder, with flash and pocket gun, stood a plainclothes man.

"Edwin," Sleet asked Wilkins, "what's up tonight?"

"Oh, nothing much. Roll along, son."

Thoughtfully Sleet glanced back at the two dark figures on the white shell shoulder. Something *was* abroad that night. All the road patrols out, men from every department—it was some cargo hotter than green citrus or off-season fish.

In Tampa, while two warehousemen unloaded the settees, Sleet walked into the night office of the Haley Brothers.

"Got any load out for me, Phil?"

"Sorry, Sleet."

At the secretary's desk Sleet began dialing night offices. The monotonous gloomy refrain, "Sorry, Sleet" or "Maybe something next week," made him feel like a bum, panhandling.

Almost his last prospect, a wholesale drug concern which occasionally threw him a load of fixtures or soda tanks, surprised him. "Yes, Mr. Travic, we have something for you," the voice said. "It goes to Venice."

Ten minutes later Sleet parked the Barrel by the alley platform and stepped into the office. A new man, a young nitwit he appeared, was in charge.

"I'm Travic," Sleet said. "Where's the Venice load?"

The man picked up a little package, a two-ounce bottle in its carton. "This goes to the Medical Center, and here's the twenty cents for— Why, what's the matter, Mr. Travic?"

Sleet leaned weakly against a filing case. "That's the Venice load? *That?* Why, you stripped gear!" He started to laugh, but the laugh ended in an oath. Pushing a big truck eighty miles with a two-ounce load for twenty cents—of all his batty jobs in two years of gipsying, that surely was tops. Tops and the last straw.

As he turned away, in a blue funk of discouragement, the phone rang. The nitwit answered. "Yes? Mr. Travic? Yes, he's just leaving. Mr. Travic, Paloma is calling you."

Sleet came back to the phone. "Hello. Oh, *Lee*. . . . A load for me at Venice? Are you sure it's a load and not a picayune grief? . . . Okay. What's the contact down there? . . . Man called Gomez at the Roll In. Got it. Thanks a mile, Lee. . . . Yes, I'll have a cup on my way past."

A LITTLE before midnight Sleet swung the Barrel in to the Roll In station at Venice. The place looked dark, deserted; but as he stopped, a man stepped from the shadows of an oleander.

"Gomez? Hop in. Where's the load?"

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"Down Treasure Island. Head down Main here."

As the Barrel rolled along the broad avenue, Sleet eyed the stranger. Part Cuban, he looked and sounded. Queer dead-pan, sharp roving eyes—who the devil was he?

Six blocks past the Medical Center, Sleet suddenly braked. "Almost forgot, Gomez. Promised to drop an item at the hospital."

"Why not drop it on our way out, Travic?"

"That's sense. Saves a mile."

As they reached the dead end of the avenue and swung left into the dark road Gomez indicated, Sleet's uneasiness sharpened. What sort of load could be down in that jungle? As he recalled from a jaunt once with Leda the road wound down past a few obscure residences and mullet-smokers shacks, through a cabbage-palm wilderness, past sloughs, inlets, to nowhere.

At a bayhead down the island Gomez instructed him to swing right, into a faint corduroy. With mangrove and sea oats slapping at the cab, Sleet proceeded in low a quarter mile, till the trail ended beside a deep-water inlet. At Gomez's direction he switched off the lights and stepped out upon the sand.

Miles from the regular ship channels, in bay and Gulf, the place was as wild and lonely a sea nook as any smuggler, any pirate of the old days, could have wished. Under the midnight moon the waters were black silver; frogs croaked dismally in the surrounding mangroves; snake-birds and swamp storks were quonking in macabre chorus.

Down at the wave edge Sleet saw the dim figures of six men; and near the inlet center a sixty-foot craft lay at anchor. He recognized the general lines of the boat. A Cuban fishing schooner, with live-fish wells fore and aft. The kind that cleared from Cienfuegos or Trinidad, and worked the red-snapper banks of Campeche and the middle Gulf.

From the group at the landwash a man came slouching up to the Barrel. Big, hulking, a flash in one hand and an iron pipe in the other, the nondescript was as ugly a whelk as Sleet had ever bumped into. Garg, the name was.

Sleet swung on Gomez. "Booze running, eh, buddy? Thought I'd be glad for any kind of a pay load, did you? Well, your mistake. I'm pulling out *prontissimo,* and if I ever see you again I'll give you a kick for dragging me down into this pelican puke."

By way of answer, Gomez stepped to the cab, pocketed the keys, and confronted Sleet again, at a safe ten feet. In his hand Sleet saw the glint of a heavy automatic, which the man had produced almost magically. And the hulking Garg, gripping the pipe, had sidled up close enough to framm his brains out.

"You slimy smugs," Sleet rasped, "you'll play billy hell—"

Gomez stopped him with a flip of the gun. "Get wise, chump. You'll roll your Barrel where we say roll; you'll keep your trap closed and a grin on your mug *—or else!"*

The threat showed Sleet plainly that if he tried to balk, tried any break, sunrise would find him sprawled back in the mangroves, with the gulls pecking his eyes out.

AS THEY waited, Gomez coolly alert with the gun, Sleet cursing silently, helplessly, a boat pushed away from the schooner, skirled ashore, and dumped out eight men. It returned for a second, smaller, load.

Sleet watched astounded. Cut-throat booze-runners? Not this outfit. Booze-runners were cherubim compared with this crew. Angel sharks! The lowest, darkest, shrewdest, most dangerous rattlers of the Caribbean sail-by-nights.

The puzzle of the road patrols on 41 cleared up for him instantly. The Immigration men at Tampa had somehow got wind that a cargo of aliens would be unloaded somewhere on the West Coast; and all the other law agencies, state and county, had thrown in to help nail the runners.

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A cold fear crept over Sleet. Here was he in the very middle of the mix. Gomez's phone call to Leda; Leda's innocent relaying of it; Gomez's cagey steps in drawing him into the works till he was a helpless, gun-prodded prisoner—the whole business was as efficient as an execution.

Lined up two by two, the fourteen aliens were marched up to the Barrel and herded in a group, on the moonlit sand, while two sharks opened the doors. Three of the aliens were splattering Greek like Tarpon Springs spongers; but among the majority of them Sleet heard, or imagined he heard, the mutter of soft Viennese German. Whoever they were, they had come thousands of miles to reach this land, and probably had paid over their last dollars to these angel sharks.

In that minute of waiting, Sleet saw a little drama that tugged at his heart. All of the group were looking around with entranced eyes at this American strand, and in their voices was unmistakable gladness. But one of them, a tall gaunt man who seemed shaky from some recent ordeal, stepped off a little distance to himself, and knelt upon the sand, and raised his face to heaven. *"Herr Gott, ich danke—"*

As the aliens were being herded into the van, it suddenly dawned on Sleet why he had been shanghaied by this crew. *His good reputation!* The road patrols didn't search Sleet Travic's truck. The Barrel would roll right through those cordons. Brother, did this outfit have brains! And did they know their West Coast!

He had a premonition of what they intended doing with him when he got them wherever they were going.

The aliens, Garg, and all the sharks except one got into the van. The man outside bolted the doors, brushed his hands daintily, and came sauntering over to Sleet.

Until that moment Sleet had thought Gomez was leader of the outfit. But he saw his mistake, as this other man confronted him. Thirty-eight, medium tall, natty in tropical flannels, the man reminded him of a Toledo sword—keen, polished, hard.

"I'm so sorry, Mr. Travic, to disturb the even tenor of your night. Yet, methinks, discretion has so fought with nature that you will freely go with this affair along."

"Hell's brass bells!" Sleet gasped. "You even know about that dog-eared Oxford in my cab!"

The man bowed. "May I present myself formally, Mr. Travic? Lorenz Bodie. Sometimes vulgarly known as Black Bodie."

The man knocked Sleet breathless. Black Lorenz Bodie! Who'd died of yellow fever six years ago. Whose reputation still haunted the Gulf ports. Whose former gangs had bumped four Immigration men. Whose outfit once, down off Matagorda, had tied ballast iron to eighteen aliens, tossed the men alive into the sea, and then laughed when a Coast Guard cutter boarded them for search. Now here, *alive,* stood that fearsome leader of the angel sharks.

"By your expression," Bodie remarked, "I perceive that my repute hath preceded me. Excellent. Where awe doth sit—"

Helpless though he was, the mockery of Bodie's politeness angered Sleet. "Cut the cloak-and-sword talk, smart boy," he snapped. A dumb butcher like Garg could be merely despised, but this man outraged all human decency. "If I've got to cart you black cats somewhere, let's get going."

WITH a torment in his heart, Sleet rolled the Cracker Barrel on and on through the Florida night, north on 41.

Beside him in the cab, Gomez was sitting silent, his roving eyes alert, his hand clasping the automatic under his coat. At bumps and on curves Sleet felt the muzzle jigging against his ribs, a tacit reminder that eternity was always just an inch and a split second away.

On the right side of the cab Bodie was nonchalantly smoking cigarettes and pricking Sleet with his witticisms. Sleet was not sure, but he believed two of the sharks in the van were lugging submachine-guns

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and had sliced peepholes in the canvas panels, to be ready for an emergency.

As the Barrel rolled over the Manatee River bridge, Bodie lolled back and pulled his hat down to hide most of his face. "Methinks I should sleep," he remarked to Sleet. "Four miles ahead we will encounter one Edwin Wilkins and one Spencer Rawling, Immigration Chief, who once was acquainted with my physiognomy. Try to get us past them without trouble, Don Sleet. Try *hard*."

"I'll do my best," Sleet mumbled, and meant it. He mustn't let Wilkins be brutally shot down. Leda and he had visited the Wilkins home, swapped Chicago reminiscences with Mary, and stolen guavas with the three Wilkins children.

When he saw the flare and flashlights, he slowed, forcing a mechanical grin to his face. As before, Wilkins handled him.

"You again, Sleet! You seem busy tonight."

"Yeh. Carting a dredge outfit up past Kissimmee."

"Who's your friends here?"

"Owner and straw boss," Sleet explained, yawning. His heart stood still as Rawling turned a flash on Bodie.

"Okay," Wilkins said. "Roll on, son."

Sleet rolled, sucking in a sharp breath of relief. Bodie sat up and lighted a cigarette.

"Adroitly handled, Mr. Travic. Such consummate service as you've been rendering us deserves reward."

Sleet sneered. "A knife between the ribs or a slug between the eyes—that's the reward you'll give me. I've known it ever since you openly introduced yourself, Bodie."

"Take the next paved road to the right," Gomez directed. "And let's see a little more speed."

Sleet glanced at the moon inching down the western sky. Three hours till dawn. Three hours of life for him, at the most. Bodie's outfit would not travel by day. They had some hideout, in the lake country north. When he got them there, or maybe got them within striking distance, a nod from Bodie and a trigger-squeeze from Gomez would liquidate him. For all he knew, it might be just around the next bend.

In a grim way he was proud there had been no killings down the line. Panky, Wilkins, Rawling—those men owed their lives to his grin, his reputation. But at thought of Leda an intolerable jealousy filled him with anguish. He saw her, in the months ahead, going out to Cortez Beach with Craig Morton. Saw the seasons eroding away her love and memories of Sleet Travic. He saw her, slim and yielding, in the arms of another man. To him that was the chief meaning, chief agony, of the death riding with him that Hallowe'en night.

BY FOUR o'clock the Barrel was rolling through the hill-lake country north of Kissimmee. At four-thirty Gomez directed him off the paved highway onto a country road to the north. For another half hour they wound through lime and tangerine groves, through palmetto wastes, over roads more and more obscure, until, at breaking dawn, they suddenly hit a sand-drifted pavement.

Just ahead, down the wide, cracked concrete, half a dozen gray-ghostly buildings loomed up.

"Stop at the statue down there," Gomez ordered.

Sleet nodded, and glanced at Bodie. In the last hour, brooding on the human tragedies scattered back across Black Bodie's life, he had formed the wish to take the man along to hell with him. He wondered—how fast did a person die? After the *cr-aa-ck* of Gomez's automatic, would he have time to grab a tool or darnick and kill Bodie, before oblivion closed down?

As though reading his very thoughts, Bodie smiled mockingly and said: "I have a further service for you, Mr. Travic. So, patience."

At the equestrian statue in the middle of the pavement Sleet stopped the Barrel. With Gomez guarding him like an execu-

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tioner, he got out and looked around.

A ghost town. Or rather, the beginnings of a town, back in the frenzied Florida boom. A "Yankee Grief," lonely, grotesque, like a cinema suddenly stopped in mid-action. A store with arcade, a filling station, four stucco residences—all jerry-built and long since looted of every removable article. Side streets, with pavement, curbing, even light poles, stretched into the surrounding turpentines. Grass sprouted in the cracks of the avenue. Pea-vines and night-blooming jasmine, run wild, were choking the expensive plumosa palms. Pine seedlings, palmetto, maiden cane were creeping back to mantle this Ozymandias of the boom orgy.

The only signs of life about the place were four sedans parked under the plumosas by the store, and four well-dressed drivers, looking like ordinary business men.

The sedans, Sleet knew, would filter on north in a night or two, with the aliens whom he had brought through.

While he stood by the statue, watching, wondering what this "further service" was, Bodie unbolted the van doors. With goose-step efficiency the fourteen aliens were hustled into the store. Before the door was closed upon them, Sleet caught a glimpse of a water cask, loaves of bread, some other cheap food stuffs.

At Bodie's order one of the sedan drivers brought a big hamper of sandwiches, oranges and milk from his car. Another set a two-gallon keg—iced beer, Sleet surmised—among the arcade vines. It seemed to him that every act, need and step of this job had been planned with jeweled precision.

Bodie relieved a shark of the stub-barreled gun the man carried, and stepped upon the statue pedestal.

"Men: we'll have breakfast, then a rest. You're tired. We have grub, some beer. You may have two mugs apiece. No more. You know my opinion about boozing on a job. If any of you have hard stuff around, the first man who takes a swallow won't live long enough for it to hit his stomach."

He looked at the hapless Sleet, and his voice assumed again that suave mockery. "Hebe, be cup-bearer to my tired angels. Two mugs apiece to them, a mug for yourself if you like, then this further service which I mentioned."

Sleet clenched his fists. To sling beer to this outfit seemed an unbearable degradation. But he swallowed his refusal. It was not Bodie's gun, pointing carelessly at him, or Gomez's automatic, the trigger safety on red, which made him take second thought.

Circulating there by the arcade, among the men and sedans, he might conceivably have a chance to drop a lighted cigarette into a gas tank. The explosion would scatter flames among the vines, plumosas, maiden cane. This was turpentine country; and there was certain to be a fire tower within field-glass range. Any sort of smoke or flames would bring a crew here on the jump, and Bodie's plans would be scrambled.

The idea was flimsy, he realized. It likely would mean his finish, either from the explosion or the guns. But at that moment the stratagem looked like the best of the several flimsy schemes in his thoughts.

"Okay, Bodie," he agreed. To test how much freedom he had, he reached into his pocket for matches and lighted a cigarette. Then, the two guns following him, he strode over to the beer keg and mugs in the arcade vines.

WHEN he finished the flunky work and came walking back to Bodie and Gomez, some ten minutes later, Bodie handed him a government postcard and a pencil. Sleet guessed what the further service was to be. When he signed the message, "With love, Sleet"—that instant he would be shot.

As he took the card, he glanced across at the men he had served. Yawning, tired, they were stretching out sleepily on the cool pavement. Pockets stuffed with grub, the huge Garg, beer mug in one hand and the iron pipe in the other, was slouching

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across to the statue, yawning like the other sharks. But Gomez was as alert as ever, and Bodie was a poised sword.

With a wave at the men finishing their second mug, Bodie quoted airily at Sleet:

"And let me the canakin clink clink—"

Fencing desperately for the minutes, Sleet tried to pick an argument. It seemed fantastic, arguing poetry when his life was no longer than three sentences on a postcard.

"You didn't give that right. That song was sung at the Mermaid, and it goes best as a tavern chorus. Like this:

"Oo-oh!!—let me the canakin clink clink
And let me the canakin clink.
A soldier's a man
A life's but a span,
So-oo!!—let me the canakin clink!"

"Excellently interpreted," Bodie commented. "You make one see Kit Marlowe gorging herring. But now to business, Mr. Travic. You will indite a note to the fair and (presumably) virtuous Leda, at the Dew Drop hostelry. Lest she worry about your absence and set the hounds of the law prematurely on the Cracker Barrel's trail, you will write her about a load to Jacksonville, then a further load to Miami—"

"I'll write whatever you say," Sleet agreed, praying to all the gods for three minutes more. "But you're forgetting about Wednesday night, Bodie."

"Oh. Your joust with Sanches, at Tampa. My gratitude to you for reminding me."

"Don't mention it," Sleet growled. As he wrote Leda's name and address on the card, the pencil point broke, and he handed the pencil to Bodie for resharpening. "Don't forget, also, I've got a load at Paloma for tonight."

While Bodie sharpened the pencil and reflected, Sleet glanced again at the men yonder. Half of them were asleep, the others too groggy to finish the food in their hands. Ready to help with the kill, Garg had sat down nearby on the pedestal, his head wobbly, the iron pipe loose in his broad paw.

Bodie handed Sleet the pencil. "The Paloma load business will be taken care of by a wire. On the card write her about a load to Jacksonville, then one to Lake City, then your return to Tampa Wednesd—"

He bit the word off, staring at the men across the street. "Gomez!" His hard voice for once had alarm in it. "What's the matter with our punks over there?"

Gomez turned to look. In that instant, when neither man's eyes or gun was upon him, Sleet exploded. All his damned-up fury, hopelessness, and fierce desire to live, exploded like dynamite in his capable fists, his ring-quick body.

Bodie was the nearer. Sleet's left fist, jabbing in to Bodie's jaw, sent the man stumbling backward, the shoulder gun clattering to the ground. As Gomez whirled and whipped up the automatic, Sleet smashed him with the hardest right swing he had ever launched, and Gomez fell like a poled ox.

Garg had got to his feet, groggy, but dangerous because of his bulk and the iron pipe. Out of the corner of his eye, as he sprang at Garg, Sleet saw that Bodie was down on one knee but coming out of his daze and reaching for the shoulder gun.

Trusting his fists more than Gomez's automatic by the pedestal, Sleet closed with Garg, grabbed the pipe with his left hand, slung a steaming right into the big hulk's belly, gave him a paralyzing right to the jaw, tore the pipe from Garg's weakening grip, and smashed him over the head with it; and then jumped for Bodie.

With his heavy trucker shoe he ground Bodie's fingers on the pavement, as Bodie's left hand was closing over the shoulder gun. Snarling like a cornered panther, Bodie scrambled up, and yelled futilely at his men by the arcade.

Deliberately dropping the pipe, Sleet seized him by the shirtfront. There was an instant's pause as Sleet's right fist went back. "Buddy, oh buddy, what I'm going to do to you!" he jerked out, at the

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struggling man in his grasp. "What I'll do!" His fist went on back. "Here comes the haymaker, buddy!"

His flashing right cracked home. As he eased Bodie to the ground and picked up the two guns, he was afraid he had broken the man's neck. . . .

IN THE hot sun of late afternoon, the fire squad, swearing at the mention of Sleet Travic's name, came trudging back into the ghost town.

The warden strode over to the crowd in the arcade shade, where Sleet was talking to newsmen, Immigration agents, and the inevitable curiosity mongers.

"Travic," the warden called, "I'll excuse you for this fire, since you had to set on eleven men and signal somebody somehow; but the next time you start a blaze in turpentines, I'll put you on a stick and roast you in it!"

Before finishing his explanation to the newsmen, Sleet glanced across toward the statue, where Spencer Rawling's car was parked. On the runningboard an auburn-haired girl was having an earnest talk with Rawling and Sheriff Panky. He wondered what the three were shaking their heads about.

He turned to the newsmen again. "I didn't know what the stuff was," he said. "I don't know yet." He took from his pocket the empty, two-ounce bottle which had been consigned to Venice but which he intended to keep as a souvenir of a Hallowe'en night when death rode with him. "This says, 'Sodium Propyl, uh, Binyl-allyl, uh, something or other'—it's really a jaw-breaker. But the directions are simple. It says, 'One *only*, at bedtime.' So I figured that *four* of them, in each mug of beer, ought to lay those sharks out sleep-happy in quick order."

"As I'll swear it did!" an Immigration man affirmed. "Half of them won't wake till they're in the jug at Tampa."

Sleet wiped a hand across his tired eyes. "Now you folk will have to excuse me. I want to tie up a couple last bundles around here, then I'm pushing the Barrel down to Paloma."

"You and who else?" A newshawk grinned.

"Go roll your hoop." Sleet grinned back.

As he walked over to Rawling's car, the three people there rose.

"Chief," Sleet asked, "do you simply *have* to deport those poor devils? I wish you had seen what I saw last night down on that fiddler flat. They'd appreciate this country, while some of the pinkies we've got, who never whiffed a concentration camp—"

"No dice, Sleet. We'll return them to the Caribbean port they started from, and try to recover their money from these sharks; but they've got to go. About yourself, Sleet. Miss Leda here has been telling us about the three thousand dollars you haven't got. There used to be a fat reward on Bodie; but he's been officially dead for six years, and I don't believe the Bureau has a dime up for him.

"But this is the way we look at it, Sheriff Panky and I. Last night you saved our lives, and other people's. This morning, entirely by yourself, you bagged Bodie and his crew. Now, Panky is shoving in a thousand, I a thousand, and between us we're going to raise the rest of that three thousand among our friends. If you don't want it as a gift, you can have it as a loan."

It took Sleet a hard surprise. "W-why, thanks, Chief," he stammered. "Thanks, P-pank. And you, Lee, for mentioning that setup—but I'll thank you while we're rolling the Barrel down to Paloma."

He opened the rear door of Rawling's car and looked in at Lorenz Bodie, handcuffed, guarded by an agent, and locked to a special steel gadget above the arm rest.

"So long till Federal court, Bodie," he said. He lighted a cigarette and gave it to the manacled prisoner. "To hand back some of your cheap wise-cracking at me, smart boy, all's well that ends well, but your ending isn't going to pan out as you like it."

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Bill pointed across Rimrock Valley, wondering if they understood that this was the Chosen Land

Make Hay in the Moonlight

By ROBERT ORMOND CASE

Author of "X Marks the Spot," "Blind Canyon," etc.

For ninety years the K & K ranch had played a vital role in the history of Oregon. Yet now the tractors might fall silent, the sunlit alfalfa wither—because of a blond heiress who thought the West too, too divine

NOT many of the fifteen hundred-odd freshmen at Oregon State knew why they were there. Bill Kerrigan went down with one ambition in mind: to prepare himself, scientifically, to run the K & K ranch. He was of the private opinion that no other equal portion of the globe could compare to the K & K, no valley could be more beautiful than Rimrock, no air more sunlit and crystalline than that which rolled down from the Blue Mountains over the misnamed vastness of alfalfa and misty sage known as the Oregon High Desert.

There was more than a dash of sentiment in it. His great-grandfather had been the pioneer Kerrigan, of Kelsey and Kerrigan, founders of the K & K. Bill had inherited no financial interest, his grandfather having been squeezed out by the Kelseys in the second-generation battle for control. No descendant of the original partners was on the ranch, though the eastern Kelseys, the financial moguls of the clan, held title to it.

But Bill, working there each summer vacation—it grew to be more and more like home-coming, the summers always too short—held fast to his dream. Some day,

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if he got all the breaks, if the Kelsey heirs needed more money for their lavish scale of living in the east, if they decided to dispose of a huge asset that could easily become a liability at three thousand miles' distance, if he could persuade them to let him take it over on a shoestring . . .

He knew it to be the rosiest of pipe-dreams, a possibility so remote as to hover fantastically on the outermost fringe of reasonable things. Owner and proprietor of the K & K? The ranch comprised six thousand acres of irrigated land. At eighty dollars per acre, plus machinery and live-stock, the total was well beyond a half-million. When he, Bill, graduated from college, the trust fund set up before his father's death would be exhausted. He would be starting from scratch.

Nevertheless, dreams were free. History sometimes repeated itself. When old Joel Kerrigan had dropped out of the emi-grant wagon train at Rimrock in '47, close to ninety years before, he, too, had started from scratch.

IN HIS senior year Bill learned that history could repeat itself in more ways than one. He'd heard vaguely of the Los Angeles Kelseys; one of the third genera-tion had migrated south at the turn of the century and made a fortune in the citrus boom. The fortune had been rocked by the '29 crash; it had been blasted by the depression years. There was no out-ward hint of this latter gossip when Hack Kelsey, handsome, brash and grinning, showed up on the campus.

He was at the wheel of a long, low-hung roadster whose first cost had been more than Bill's total college expenditures to date. A transfer from U. of Cal., Southern Branch, Hack had money, apparently, in bales. Overnight, almost, he was in the thick of the senior whirl, taking his place smoothly and jovially among the campus big shots. Inevitably, in this select circle, his trail crossed Bill's.

It was at an inter-fraternity brawl. They eyed each other curiously, if not with friendliness. Even after four generations there was no love lost between the Kelseys and Kerrigans. Bill was dark and freckled, his quietly studious air belied by the cast of his jaw and the quizzical glint in his eye. Hack was arrogant and self-assured.

"Kerrigan, eh? Of the K & K?"

Bill nodded. "Your father's Maynard Kelsey?"

"In person. Let's go into a huddle, fella. Shinny up and down our family trees. In particular, what d'ye know about the old homestead?"

Hack soon revealed his interest in K & K. It was a predatory interest. He had been reared in a boom atmosphere, in a dizzy real estate merry-go-round where profits were pyramided on profits, where desert wastes were bought for a song and sold for a king's ransom, where the sky was the limit as long as monied tourists kept coming. Things were in a slump down south; Hack's father was feeling the pinch; he, Hack, proposed to show the old boy that there were new fields to conquer.

"Look," he told Bill. "Here's six thou-sand acres, all irrigated. Every foot of it rich soil. Here's all these dust-bowl farm-ers rolling into Oregon, looking for a place to light. Most of 'em are broke, sure, but don't think for a minute some of 'em haven't plenty potatoes hidden away. We buy this six thousand acres on a shoestring at eighty per acre. We sub-divide into thirty acre tracts—two hundred of 'em—and sell 'em at five thousand smackers each, also on a shoestring. The down payments cover our subdivision ex-pense. We hock our contracts and cash in. What's the house's edge on a deal like that? Maybe a quarter million. Easy money. Clean as dew."

"Sounds like business," Bill agreed. "There's two minor details. The K & K's efficient only as a large unit, under large-scale methods. Rimrock Valley's too far from markets for the little man."

Hack eyed him in astonishment. "You mean you're worrying about these dust-bowl optimists? How they'll make out after they've signed on the dotted line?"

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"It's a fact," said Bill, mildly. "They won't make out. And they've had plenty grief out yonder. Seems too bad—"

"Bah!" said Hack. "You Kerrigans were always too rock-ribbed and sanctimonious for your own good. We'll have ours; we'll be out of the picture. What happens in Rimrock Valley after that isn't our funeral."

"The second detail," said Bill, "is that the K & K is within ten years of being a century old. It's never passed into outside hands. It's a sort of institution up at Rimrock. The Valley depends on it. K & K brought the highway in, the power lines, the spur line, the first blooded stock. They look to the K & K for the latest dope on crops and soil analysis, power machinery, the most efficient farm practices. In lean years—"

But this slant, too, was beneath Hack's notice; he disposed of it bluntly: "Horsefeathers!"

JUST before Christmas Hack left the campus one weekend for a quick trip up to Rimrock. It was his first glimpse of the ranch, and he came back more enthused than ever. At the same time he was more guarded toward Bill.

"It's a natural," said he. "A perfect setup for subdivision. The customers'll see it in a minute, in spite of the dust in their eyes. And I'm beginning to see your fine Eyetalian hand, fellow."

"What d'ye mean?"

"Boring from inside, eh?" said Hack. "Sneaking up on the old K & K through the back alley? You didn't tell me you'd worked on the ranch since you were half grown. You didn't mention that you'd be a big shot up there next summer."

"No big shot," said Bill. "They call it mechanical superintendent, but I'll be in dungarees, pounding the tractors on the tail. They've got twenty big crawlers, and it'll be up to me to keep 'em moving."

" 'S all right," said Hack. "I wasn't born yesterday, son. You've got your ideas about K & K and I've got mine. Here's your last chance to get in on the gravy. Dad's crowded a little at the minute, but he's still got credit. If I can cook up a deal on the K & K, he'll back me up. You want a piece of it, on account of knowing the ranch so well, and being looked up to as a stuffed shirt in the neighborhood?"

"Thanks," said Bill. "I'll just keep on pounding the tractors on the tail."

"Okay," said Hack. "Look to your hole card, fella."

A week before graduation an obscure item on the financial page of a metropolitan newspaper caught Bill's eye. It mentioned briefly that one J. H. Cosgriff, western legal representative of the Kelsey estate, had received instructions from New York to place the estate's real property on the market. This real property consisted of a large block of land in Rimrock Valley, known as the old K & K ranch, well remembered by pioneers.

He gathered his facts the next day—his record, unqualified recommendations from men whose names drew weight—and hurried to Portland, crowding his ancient jalopy to the limit over the eighty-mile stretch.

His interview with Cosgriff was both encouraging and demoralizing. The middle-aged attorney didn't seem to think the proposal bizarre. He knew the Kerrigan name; Bill's record spoke for itself. But the decision rested in the hands of one who knew nothing of Bill and less about the West. A woman, to be exact—a young woman. A Miss Anne Monroe, step-daughter of one of the eastern Kelseys.

This was news to Bill. The "estate," or "the heirs," as he had nebulously—and a little resentfully, it must be admitted—designated the owners of the K & K, was this Anne Monroe, who wasn't even a Kelsey by blood! Cosgriff explained the setup. There had been other heirs, other Kelsey holdings in the East. In a division of the assets that had just taken place, this Anne Monroe had agreed to accept the K & K as full satisfaction of her claims on the estate. She was now the sole owner of a ranch that she had never

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seen; whose real value was unknown.

"It took courage," said Cosgriff. "It was a leap in the dark for her. She's an orphan. She's lived always on a lavish scale—town house, country house, summers abroad, and all the rest of it. Right now she's graduating from Vassar. She's never been west."

"She took a chance," Bill agreed, with a touch of bitterness. "Still, she ought to struggle along."

"To come back to your offer," said Cosgriff. "We'll recapitulate briefly. You want the management of the K & K on a profit-sharing basis for two years. This to prove your caliber to Miss Monroe. You want an option on the entire ranch and equipment during these two years; an option to purchase. There'll be no down payment, and the purchase price amortized over a period of twenty years, the annual payments and interest constituting a first lien on the gross proceeds of the ranch."

He smiled. "You're asking Miss Monroe to gamble with you. Never having met the lady, I can't say that she's a gambler. She may be. However, I'll file your offer for her consideration when she comes out."

"She's coming west?"

"In two weeks. To inspect the ranch." He hesitated. "I should warn you, my boy, not to hope too much. Another offer has already been made for the K & K. On the face of it, at least, it's far more attractive than yours. An option to purchase outright at a half million. A guarantee to pay ten percent within ninety days, fifty percent at the end of two years, all of it in three. A certified check for ten thousand accompanies the offer. Signed by Maynard Kelsey. One of the Los Angeles Kelseys, you know."

This was a body blow. Hack hadn't just been sounding off, after all; he'd figured a deal; his father was backing him up.

"Nevertheless, I'll file your offer," said Cosgriff, with a twinkle. "As I say, I've never met the girl. She *may* be a gambler."

Bill telephoned the K & K that night and talked to old Henry Devore, the ranch superintendent. There was something solid and dependable about Henry; he and Bill had been cronies for years. Sure Bill's job was waiting; when in heck would he be up to the ranch, to start soothing these temperamental, prima donna tractors? Sure he'd heard about this heiress coming; and so what?

The ranch would still be there, dirt would have to be cultivated, long after financial moguls, nitwit heiresses and Wall Street itself had passed to their assorted happy hunting grounds. Come running as soon as he, Bill, got untangled from the trick caps and gowns in which college boys did their stuff. Dungarees, a blow torch and a grease gun were waiting.

HACK hinted that he was heading south after graduation, but Bill was not surprised, when the jalopy snorted and chugged into the homestretch at the K & K two weeks later, to see Hack's swanky roadster glittering in the orchard. Bill drove on through and parked the jalopy among several others drawn up beside the bunkhouse. Cookshack and bunkhouse faced the great quadrangle which was flanked on the west and north by the machinery shed, shops and storerooms and on the east by the orchard and the landscaped grounds surrounding the Big House.

Joel Kerrigan, the pioneer, had not lived to see the house he planned and whose foundation stones he had shaped winter after patient winter in the quarry under the north rim. It was huge, weathered, many-gabled; for more than sixty years it had been known throughout the high desert by the simple designation of "the Big House." It had seen Congressmen and governors as guests; generals had accepted its hospitality during the Indian wars; a rough-riding president had spent a week-end there.

Henry Devore and his family had lived in the mansion for years, not because Henry yearned for such magnificence, but "to keep the blamed castle from rack and ruin." Also, it must be kept open for the convenience of executives of the cor-

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poration, for the heirs and other brass collars who dropped in at intervals.

Hack had assumed the latter status and had moved in, as a matter of course. After Bill had eaten with the hands at the cookshack, as usual, and had donned his dungarees and was out inspecting the company front of tractors in the quadrangle, Henry approached with a puzzled glint in his eye.

"Who's this Hack Kelsey varmint? He blew in here just before Christmas, and blew right out. Now he's back again, bigger than ever, with a letter from Cosgriff giving him the run of the place. How much water does he draw, if any?"

Bill explained the setup, knowing he could speak in confidence. He and Hack had both made an offer on the place; this Monroe woman was coming to look the ranch over before making up her mind.

Henry whistled.

"So that's it! I was wondering how come he was giving me the eye, so knowing and upstage, right in my own billiwack. As much as to say: 'Treat me right, my good man, or else.' He figures he's got the K & K tucked away in his hip pocket. He figures to be-dazzle this popeyed heiress when she shows up. Unloose his fatal charm on her. That's why he's got so much dude finery laid out—flannels and polo shirts and trick riding boots and such." He grunted. "The critter's phoney."

"Maybe," said Bill, gloomily. He'd been thinking it over, his rosy-tinted glasses laid aside, and knew he was out on a limb. "But he's got what it takes in this man's world, the same being certified checks. All I can offer is a shoestring gamble."

"She's probably one of these ga'nt and mournful gals, running heavy to red hair and buck teeth," Henry opined. "That kind's usually brainy. What a spot that would be for this Hack rooster! Well, strength to your arm, son."

OLD HENRY was wrong. When the heiress arrived a week later, accompanied by her secretary, she had neither red hair nor buck teeth; she was blond, streamlined and her smile was ravishing. Hack went down to the junction to meet them, at the county seat; it was on the main line, a few miles below the mouth of Rimrock.

They came rolling back in the big roadster, Hack and the heiress chummily forward, the secretary perched demurely among the baggage in the rumble seat. It was plain that Hack had already made big medicine; he and the heiress were thick as thieves. She preferred to be called Babs, it appeared; Miss Monroe being far too formal for these environs. The secretary, Agatha Callan, was Aggie.

This was relayed to Bill; he didn't meet them formally until that night. The heiress sent out word that she wanted to meet the various lieutenants of the ranch; they simply must join her at dinner at the Big House.

"It's a request from the throne, boys," old Henry explained to his various straw bosses—Bill, the head ditch-rider, the animal husbandry expert in charge of the blooded stock. "She's downright flabbergasted to find out you're all college men, that you don't have tufts on your ears and thumbs on your feet. So dude up. Spruce up. Give her a load of that there elegance. . . . She's a yodeler," he told Bill, privately. "She gushes. Everything out in our big beautiful West is just too excruciatingly divine."

"She didn't mention business?"

"Business?" Old Henry arched an eyebrow. "How quaint! No, she aims to sneak up on it. She'll be here a week." He sighed. "If I do say it, who shouldn't, being nearsighted and all, she's shorely restful to look at."

Hack had assumed charge of the seating arrangements in the ancient, timbered and strangely stately dining room. He enthroned himself and Babs at the head of the huge table; Bill was placed far down the line, beside the secretary. Hack intended this as the opening gun in his campaign, plainly enough; there was a smug glint in his eye.

Bill didn't object, after his first closeup of Aggie. She was as restful to the

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eye as her employer, though in far less spectacular fashion. Compared to Babs Monroe's somewhat synthetic loveliness, she was wholesome, healthy and real; even the tweeds she wore were in pleasing contrast to Bab's flaming sports outfit.

Under cover of the wise-cracking barrage emanating from the head of the table, Bill learned much about her. Her status with the heiress was that of companion as well as secretary; they had been classmates at Vassar, though she, too, like Bill, had expended the last of her patrimony on an education. She had managed Babs' personal finances during their last year at school. When this trip west impended, Babs had insisted that she come along to help cope with the problem of what to do with the K & K.

"And it looks like I'd better start coping now," Aggie told him. "With two handsome brutes like you and Hack running at large, each with an axe to grind, I smell trouble. It looks like Hack's a fast grinder. Isn't it a horse on you, sort of?"

"Maybe Hack thinks so," Bill said, grinning. "I'm not complaining."

"So? It's come to you that the secretary-bodyguard might be worth cultivating?"

"I'm surprised," said Bill, "I'm surprised that a person of your rare intelligence, breeding and beauty—"

"Thank you so much."

"—should entertain such lowbrow thoughts. You've got my option with you, in your secretarial briefcase?"

She nodded. "And Hack's."

"Read mine again," said Bill. "You'll find nothing personal in it."

"Strictly business, eh? No charm school in the offing?"

"No charm school. If Hack sells her on the theory that there's competition on any other basis, I'll have to beg to be excused. *Heraus* with 'em both."

She pondered this judiciously; she shook her head. "It doesn't ring true," she decided. "*Heraus* with Hack—perhaps. From your point of view, that's reasonable. But *heraus* with Babs, too? After all, the K & K's a pretty big ranch. You wouldn't try to sell yourself—just a little bit?"

"Do you think I would?"

"Not any," she said, studying him with demure approval. "The name being Kerrigan, I believe? . . . Well, we'll see. Look, didn't I tell you there was mischief afoot? Listen to what they've brewed the minute my back was turned."

IT WAS no great mischief, in Bill's eyes; Hack had merely engineered a party, down at the county seat, where there was an open-air dance pavilion. Radio and amplifier provided swing music from far-off Portland and remoter San Francisco. A new moon was on the make. So, Hack wanted to know, how about the whole gang running down there?

It would be necessary to take only two cars. He and Babs would ride in his roadster; the three stags could ride in the rumble seat, picking up their dates later in the village; Bill could bring Aggie in his heap. "How about it, Bill?"

"Fine," said Bill, instantly. A blind man could have known that Aggie was a born dancer. A new moon *was* on the make. "If it's okay by you, Aggie?"

It was, it appeared, okay by Aggie. His enthusiasm even earned him a look that was almost affectionate. Bill went to the bunkhouse to make ready.

When all had gathered in the starlit gloom of the orchard, where the two cars were waiting, Babs Monroe approached Bill and slid her arm through his. It was plain that the heiress was regally accustomed to the attention of all males on her horizon.

"You've been avoiding me, Mr. Bill Kerrigan," she accused, her long lashes fluttering. "Let's look at this heap that Hack was so high-hat about. I adore heaps. . . . Oh, it's wonderful!"

She affected to be transported by the sight of the jalopy, which was no great shakes in any company. It had been a good car once; it was a trailworn monster now, its paint but a memory, its fenders listless as elephant's ears. "It's positively *darling!*

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Run along with the others, Hack. I'm riding with Bill."

"Sorry," said Bill, affably. "Aggie goes with me."

"But I *want* to go with you, Bill. Aggie doesn't mind, you goose. Go on, all of you. See you at the dance."

Bill's gorge rose at her arrogant assumption that the incident was closed, that her slightest whim was law.

"You wouldn't disappoint Hack," he reproved, maintaining his careless pose. He propelled her to Hack's car. Hack, scowling a moment since, leaped eagerly to open the door. Together, they handed her in. "C'mon, Aggie, let's go."

"You wouldn't know," said Aggie, as they headed westward under the strengthening splendor of the sky, slowly, so the dust in the wake of Hack's roadster would settle, "You wouldn't know, Bill, what music that was back yonder. 'Sorry,' says you. 'My compliments, princess. But little Aggie goes with me.'" His eyes lifted.

She chuckled softly. "It was swell, Bill, even if it was foolish. Because, my friend, don't you understand that when the showdown comes, when the ball's over and all the grand gestures have been made, it's the name of Miss Babs Monroe—not Aggie's—that goes on the dotted line?"

Bill grunted. "'Aggie doesn't mind.' Does she make a habit of kicking you around like that?"

"That's what I'm paid for. One must earn one's keep, mustn't one?" She slid her arm through his. "It's all right, Bill. She's a pretty good egg, at heart. Look, are the stars always so big and bright on the high desert?"

IT WAS gorgeous at the pavilion, though the new moon disappeared too soon into the west. Hack monopolized the heiress, which was all right with Bill; it left

(Please turn the page)

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Aggie entirely to him. He didn't notice it when the stags disappeared one by one with their village dates. He didn't even see Hack and Babs leave the crowded floor.

As they drove back under the flaming stars, which were bigger and better at midnight, Bill knew that the whole pattern of his life was rearranging itself, moment by moment. All his life, until this evening, he'd pointed toward a certain goal; everything else had been secondary to it. Now that goal was secondary. New stakes, bigger stakes, had appeared at the table.

In the morning, Aggie said: "I'm sorry, Bill. We were supposed to inspect the ranch today, but Babs can't be bothered. She and Hack—he *is* a handsome brute, isn't he?—have decided to run over to the Pass to look at the mountains. They'll be gone all day. So I guess you'll have to show me around. It's up to me to check up, anyway. D'you mind?"

Bill chuckled inwardly. No, he didn't mind.

He was delighted at the ease with which she absorbed the business end of the ranch. Granting that Cosgriff had given her a complete report, she had had less than a week to analyze it. Not one woman in hundreds could have done it so thoroughly. Particularly one who had never before been west of the Yellowstone or north of the Golden Gate. She inquired into every phase of the K & K's intricate mechanism. She was interested in the per acre cost of water, the labor overhead, the investment in tractors.

It wasn't a synthetic interest. What touched Bill deepest was her instant understanding of the pioneer background that was a part of his own heritage. She insisted on inspecting the rock quarry under the north rim, where taciturn Joel Kerrigan had spent so many patient winter hours. She visited the family plot, whose headstones dated back to the Civil War.

"You know, Bill," she said, "it is too bad to split up the K & K. Mr. Cosgriff told me that this was the only ranch he knew of in the Northwest that's been in the same family for ninety years. I didn't really understand what that meant until today. It ought to be held together."

"That's been my theory," Bill agreed. "I wish Babs could see it."

"I'll work on her," she promised. "We'll all have a session tomorrow."

But Hack and Babs had other ideas. The day was gorgeous. There was a lake up in the Blue Mountains that offered the finest boating and swimming; stuffy business details could wait until that night, in the cool of the evening. Bill and Aggie watched them go, Bill hugely delighted, Aggie frowning a little.

"I'm falling down on the job," she told Bill. "Babs is getting out of hand. I might have known it. And it's a tough break for you, Bill. Friend Hack seems to be making hay."

"*Heraus* with 'em," said Bill. "Look, we'll run up the valley today. We'll have lunch up at the reservoir; you might as well see where all this water comes from."

HACK and Babs didn't show up after supper, so Bill and Aggie went down to the village. The music was divine at the open-air pavilion; on the crowded floor it was as though they were alone under the jeweled sky. The moon was big and bold in the high zenith.

As they headed back, into the teeth of the cool night wind rolling down out of Rimrock, Bill knew that he was approaching a major crossroads of life. The K & K business could wait; it was a gamble, on the knees of the gods. Why wait longer to learn the verdict in the more important gamble?

"Let's drive up on the north rim, Aggie." He tried to make it casual; he wondered if she could hear his heart beating. "Give the ranch the once-over from a height. It's a spectacle by night, with the stars reflected in the main canal. What say?"

"Tut," she admonished. "Honest, now, is it necessary to list the number of stars reflected in the main canal? Mr. Cosgriff's report didn't mention them. And who was

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it said right at the start that this was strictly business? The name was Kerrigan." She chuckled softly. "Besides, the moon will be bigger in another hour or so, won't it? Maybe we'll make it the final flourish. We're leaving in the morning, you know."

"In the morning?" said Bill, appalled. "It's only Friday. You're supposed to be here a week."

"I'm worried about Babs," she confessed. "It's up to me to get her back to Portland, so she and Mr. Cosgriff can decide what to do about the K & K. In a more business-like atmosphere, you understand. She shouldn't make the decision here; her sense of values might be distorted. Right?"

"But what about you? Do you want to hurry away?"

"I?" She leaned back, her hair windblown, smiling up at the flaming stars. "I wouldn't know, Bill. I haven't been up to the north rim yet."

It was after midnight when Hack and Babs rolled in. Hack was beaming fatuously. A new beauty had touched Babs' face. A look passed between the two girls, Aggie's searching, almost accusing, Babs' both apprehensive and defiant. They went immediately into the house.

Hack strode up and down, chest expanded, his hands in his pockets. He was smoking a cigar; it glowed through the shadows like a red, triumphant eye.

"I win, fellow," said he, at length. "You lose. Notice anything different about Babs?"

"She seemed happy. What else?"

"She was wearing an engagement ring. I brought it with me from Portland when I came up. On suspicion." His cigar glowed. "Fast work, what?"

"Congratulations," said Bill.

"Thanks," said Hack. "And you can go back to your tractors in the morning, son. Where you belong. Only thing is, you won't have a job long."

"Okay." Strangely, Bill felt no animosity toward Hack. It seemed like far in the past that their trails had crossed. "Okay, Hack."

AGGIE came alone through the shadows; she came directly to Bill and placed a hand on his arm. "Sorry," she said. "I've bungled everything."

"Sorry? How come, Aggie? Everybody else seems to be happy."

"Bill! Hack's told you?"

"Sure." He pulled her arm through his and held it close. "And I've congratulated him. So the episode's closed."

"And you don't mind—really?" Her firm yet gently-moulded features softened, became more radiant. "You're not just being a good loser?"

"*I* a good loser?" Bill chuckled. "I haven't lost yet. The K & K—yes. So what? . . . C'mon, Aggie. Let's leave these sentimental pilgrims. We've got business up on the north rim."

"Wait." She pressed his arm warningly, and turned to Hack. "You heard him, Hack. You can learn a lesson in sportsmanship from Mr. Bill Kerrigan. Listen. I've just had a session with Babs. As a good secretary I had a duty to do, and I did it. She's all broken up. I've told her that you weren't interested in her, but in the K & K. That if she weren't the owner of a ranch worth a half million you wouldn't have noticed her. Was I right or wrong?"

"Wrong," said Hack, expansively. "Where is she?"

"Out on the front porch. Crying. If you can dry her tears you're a better man than I think you are. . . . All right, Bill," she said, a little breathlessly, as Hack strode away. "The north rim, I think you said? Let's hurry, then. I—I'm feeling kind of low."

"About what?" Bill wanted to know. "Babs? She'll be easily convinced. Hack's a good salesman. He knows all the answers."

"I wonder?" she said.

It was beautiful on the north rim. The valley was at their feet, a shoreless infinity beyond. Near and far, in the main canal, was the sheen of reflected stars.

"Forget Babs," said Bill. "Forget the K & K. Let's talk about us. Look—"

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"Since there's nothing personal about it," she said, judiciously, "since you naturally can't express yourself otherwise, I guess you can leave your arm where it is for the moment. Understand, of course, that it commits me to nothing." Her face was turned away, toward the valley floor; he could see her cheek dimple. "You were about to say, sir?"

"What I'm about to say," said Bill, "takes the courage of a roaring lion."

"It should," she agreed. So still it was that even their whispers seemed to shuttle back from higher slopes. "Do you realize we've known each other only three days, Mr. Bill Kerrigan? Or is it just the custom of the country?"

"No," said Bill. "Some things are the same the world over. The sun rises and sets. Rivers reach the sea. If I'd known you a thousand years I'd never have been more sure than in that first minute. Says I to myself: 'How often, in the dark of the moon, have you asked yourself what it's all about, this life business, who says so and why? So, William—' "

"Says you?"

"Says I: 'Here's the answer, right beside you. Who said you'd ever felt downcast and lonely? Don't let her get away.' "

"SO YOU'RE hanging on," she said softly. "The name being Kerrigan? I know, Bill. I could see it in your eyes. I've been lonely, too. I've been worse than that, something you won't understand—I've been afraid.

"I was scared to death that first day, when we rolled into the orchard. I'd never been West before. But it didn't last long. It's been like homecoming, sort of . . . We're a pair of idiots, Bill. Darn this north rim business." She drew his arm closer. "Thus encouraged?"

"Thus encouraged," he said, "I'll shoot the works. I've lost out here, Aggie. I won't even have a job in another month or six weeks, depending on how fast Hack gets action on his subdivision theories. But there'll be another job. Somewhere else there's plenty of room. If you're willing to start from scratch with me, Aggie—" He was suddenly overwhelmed at his own temerity. "It'll be a gamble—I know I've no right—"

"Wait." Her face was still turned away, toward the valley floor. "Wait, gambler. Look."

Twin headlights emerged from the dark shadow that was the ranch headquarters. They drew nearer, gaining speed; they were directly opposite and below. The headlights flicked off, and on again, and again—a patent signal. Then the path of brilliance held steadily ahead. The car rolled on, dwindled in the immensity westward.

"There!" She relaxed with a sigh. "Hack did make his bluff good, bless him. I feel better. My conscience is clear, as far as Babs is concerned, at least. That was Babs and Hack. They're heading for Portland. Babs promised to signal me if everything was all right. With them, I mean."

"Ha!" said Bill. "Babs is abandoning you here? She's through with you—you're out of a job? Fine. Perfect." He drew her to him; they looked at each other steadfastly. For the first time it seemed that they were truly alone. "Us unemployed will have to stick together, Aggie. There's no help for it now. Yes? No?"

"Of course, Bill," she said, simply. "Surely you'd gathered that. If you wish I—I'll gamble with you. Only you don't have to call me Aggie," she said, her voice muffled. "Unless you like."

"Why not?"

"Agatha's my second name. I'm usually called Anne." She roused up in pretended alarm. "You're sure they're gone? They haven't turned back?"

"Of course they're gone," said Bill, jealously. "Anne? No. Aggie it is."

"But the last name is—Monroe."

"Monroe?"

"It seemed like such a good idea, Bill." She was trying to be very matter-of-fact about it. "It wasn't bad, at that, the way it turned out. I'm not complaining, Mr. Cosgriff thought it was all right—just while I was inspecting the ranch, you

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know. It would give me a free hand. Until I decided what to do.

"He said you and Hack would both be on the ground, that it would help me separate the sheep from the goats. It did. It looks like you're the goat, Bill. . . . Babs was willing. It didn't occur to me that it might get complicated. On Bab's account, I mean. She's really a dear and she fell so hard for Hack. . . . D'you see, Bill?"

Bill didn't see; he was dazed. "Not yet. *You're* the owner of the K & K?"

"Correct. Does it make any difference? It better not."

"Who's Babs?"

"My secretary, Babs Callan. She was my secretary, I mean. Now the fiancée of Mr. Hack Kelsey. Of the Los Angeles Kelseys, you know." She giggled. "You're Bill Kerrigan. I'm your fiancée, Anne Monroe. Only we've compromised on Aggie. You're the new manager of the K & K. It's a big ranch, with a mortgage on it. I'm the mortgage. Does that clear everything up, dear?"

"Lawsy!" said Bill.

"I know," she soothed. "You're still in a fog. Look—that's the moon up yonder. It's in the sky, shining down on Rimrock . . ."

Her voice trailed away, the facts having overhauled Bill at last. What they said after that—two gamblers, whispering together over incredible winnings—raised up no echoes. Moreover, it was strictly business; many stars still remained to be counted down yonder, twinkling and blinking in the main canal.

They counted them all. . . .

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A hush blanketed the courtroom as the millionaire's wheelchair jerked two paces nearer Daniels

Sand In the Snow

By NORBERT DAVIS

CHAPTER XX

THE WITNESS TAKES THE STAND

BOKEN was shouting over the noise in the room: "Your honor, your honor! I protest against the slanderously criminal accusation made by the attorney for the defense! I did *not* coach the witness! She was temporarily overcome by the horror of coming face to face with the defendant again. The remarks were uttered as a result of momentary hysteria!"

Daniels said: "She certainly isn't a very reliable witness if her hysteria results in such confusion even before she starts to testify."

"Mr. Daniels!" Pooley shouted. "Your remarks and your conduct are in contempt of the dignity of this court! I fine you the sum of one hundred dollars!"

"That won't bother him much," Boken said in a barely audible tone. "His wife has plenty of money."

A muscle in Daniels' face twitched. He was white with restrained fury, and he controlled his voice with an effort that shook him. "Mr. Boken, won't you repeat that remark in a louder tone? I don't think everyone here heard you."

Boken backed up a step, raising one arm in an awkward half-gesture of defense.

"Mr. Daniels," Pooley said. "Mr. Daniels! I impose an additional fine of fifty dollars!"

Daniels turned his head slowly to look at him. He didn't say anything, but his expression was so eloquently savage that Pooley's face lost a little of its color.

The first installment of this five-part serial, herein concluded, was printed in the Argosy for April 1

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"Thank you," said Daniels in a low voice. "Thank you, your honor."

Pooley moistened his lips. "You may pay the fine to the clerk at the end of this session."

"I shall do so," said Daniels. He sat down in his chair, and the tension that had gripped the room relaxed slightly.

There was a rustling murmur from the audience, and the clerk rapped sharply for order. Henrietta Parkins was sworn, and sat down in the witness chair. Boken had lost his air of confidence. He made a visible effort to regain it, but his voice shook a little as he asked the first formal question.

Henrietta Parkins had an air of righteous indignation. Yes, she snapped, she certainly did remember the day of August 17th. She would, in fact, never forget it as long as she lived.

"Tell the jury in your own words what happened on that day," Boken requested.

HENRIETTA PARKINS turned and faced the jury with an important little bustle. It was obvious that she was going to enjoy this. Her watery eyes glistened eagerly behind the thick lenses of her spectacles.

"I was washing that day. I always wash twice a week. I say a body can't keep things proper and clean just washing once a week.

"The Hyde cottage is about a hundred yards further up the Canyon than mine. I can see it from my back porch where I wash. I could see that poor, dear girl working and scrubbing around the house."

Henrietta Parkins paused to dab gingerly at her cheeks with a wadded handkerchief.

"Please try to control yourself, Miss Parkins," Boken said. "I realize that this is a great strain on you."

"It is," Henrietta Parkins agreed tearfully. "Oh, it is!" She drew a deep tremulous breath and went on bravely: "After a while, as I was rinsing my clothes, I saw a little smoke coming out of the chimney of the Hyde cottage. I knew that Dolly had started to get supper for her dear, brave father and brother. A little later I went outside to throw away my rinse water, and then I smelled something burning."

She paused to nod tragically at the jury. "Little did I realize the awful thing that was happening, but I thought it was queer because Dolly was such a good, industrious little girl and such a fine cook. I had never known her to burn anything before, so I stood there on the back steps watching, and it was the will of Providence that I did, because I saw the murderer!"

"Yes?" said Boken eagerly. "Yes? Who did you see?"

"Peter Carson!" Henrietta Parkins spat the name out as though it were a loathsome thing.

"What did you see him doing?"

"He was running away from the back door of the Hyde cottage, running and stumbling and falling, and looking back over his shoulder. His face was all twisted up like he was crazy."

"Thank you, Miss Parkins," Boken said. "Thank you for your bravery in testifying to this horrible matter."

Henrietta Parkins closed her eyes. "It was my duty," she said dramatically.

"Your witness, Mr. Daniels," Boken said.

Daniels stood up. He picked up a pamphlet from the table in front of him and held it up, opening it at random. "Read this, Miss Parkins," he requested.

"Now I protest," Boken said. "It's obvious that no person with normal eyesight can read that fine print at that distance."

Daniels said smoothly: "Miss Parkins does not have normal eyesight. She has phenomenal eyesight. She can see through the walls of a house a hundred yards away. Compared to a feat like that, reading print at this distance should be very easy."

"She never testified to that," Boken snapped.

"Oh yes, she did, by implication. She said that she saw the murderer, whom she identified as my client. How about that, Miss Parkins? You did say that Pete

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Carson was the murderer, did you not?"

"I certainly did!" said Henrietta Parkins with an emphatic nod. "He is!"

"Did you see him commit the murder?"

"I saw him running away."

"Answer my question Miss Parkins. Did you see Pete Carson commit the murder?"

"Well—no. But I know he did it."

"That's interesting," said Daniels. "How do you know?"

"I saw him running away—"

"That's it," said Daniels. "Now Miss Parkins, the district attorney left you on your own back steps. What did you do after that? After you had seen Pete Carson running away?"

"WELL—I wondered what had happened. I kept smelling the burning food stronger and stronger and I thought there was something mighty suspicious about the way Pete Carson was acting. So after he had gone I walked down to the Hyde cottage and around to the back door. I called Dolly's name and when she didn't answer, I rapped on the door. It was kinda half open and when I rapped on it, it opened further and I could see inside the kitchen."

"So?" said Daniels. "And what did you see?"

Miss Parkins shivered realistically. "I saw that poor, poor girl stretched out on the floor and all the blood—"

"Yes?" said Daniels. "And then what did you do?"

"I—I screamed—and then I turned around and ran—"

Daniels interrupted sharply: "Ah! You ran! You ran away! But you just got through telling me that you knew Pete Carson committed the murder because *he* ran away. If that is the basis on which we are to judge a person's guilt of murder, then there is just as much reason to believe that *you* are guilty of murder. Did *you* murder Dolly Hyde, Miss Parkins?"

Miss Parkins screamed shrilly and flopped over sideways in the witness chair. An attendant came running with a glass of water.

Boken shouted: "I object to this brutal intimidation of my witnesses!"

Half the audience was standing up, trying to see, and Judge Pooley's gavel thundered out a command for order.

"You needn't worry," Daniels said to Boken. "I have no more questions to ask this witness, but it seems very strange that a person who is glib about accusing other people of murder, exhibits such distress when she, herself, is accused."

"Order!" Pooley shouted. "Mr. Daniels, sit down! The attendant will remove the witness. Silence in this court!"

Henrietta Parkins was removed from the room, sobbing hysterically, and Boken summoned for his next witness Constable Ham Grey.

Ham Grey was as round as a ball and he walked to the witness stand with a decided waddle. He had a pinkish hairless face and small wide-set blue eyes with a humorous twinkle in them. He identified himself as the police force of Petersville, which was, in turn, identified as a wide space in the road occupied by a general store, a couple of pool halls, a beer tavern and several oil stations, two miles north of Coldiron Canyon.

Boken said: "I direct your attention to the date of August 17th of this present year. Do you recall the date?"

"Yup," said Ham Grey. "Sure do."

"Tell the jury what occurred on that day."

"Well," said Grey comfortably. "I was sittin' on the bench in front of old man Meekin's general store. It was a right hot day and I was just a-sittin' and a-lookin' and not thinkin' about much but maybe goin' and havin' a bottle of beer for myself, when I heard this voice a-hootin' and a-hollerin' down the road."

"What did you do then?" Boken asked.

"Well—I sorta got up and looked around."

"Did you locate the owner of the voice."

"Yup. I seen Pete Carson a-comin' larrupin' down the road a-yellin' and a-hollerin' fit to kill."

"What did you do then?"

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"Well, I couldn't hardly figure it out. Pete, he looked somethin' terrible with his face all twisted up and white and yellin' like he was. I woulda thought maybe he'd tooken himself too much to drink only I know'd Pete never drank nothin' at all, so I up and hollered to him and says: 'Hi, Pete! What's ailin' you anyway?' "

"And what did the defendant answer?" Boken pressed.

"Well, I couldn't hardly make head nor tail of it. He said somethin' about Dolly Hyde bein' murdered up to her house, and I thought maybe he was just jokin'. But then I see he had some blood on his hand and on the knees of his overalls, and so I thought it was maybe serious. And I says, 'Pete, you just better trot along with me now, while we go into old man Meekin's store and give a ring to the sheriff and see what's what!' "

"And then?" said Boken.

"Well, it was like that. We went into the store, and I rung the sheriff, and he said that there had been a murder reported up at the Hyde cabin, and that they was lookin' for Pete Carson. So I said that I had him."

"You saw the blood on Peter Carson, the defendant's clothes and on his hands?"

"Sure did," said Ham Grey reluctantly.

"You are certain that it was blood?"

"Sure am," said Ham Grey. "Seen a lot of it in my day."

BOKEN went back to his table and returned carrying a wrapped bundle of cloth. He unwrapped it, taking his time and heightening the suspense as much as he could. He uncovered an old pair of coveralls and held them up in front of Ham Grey.

"Are these the clothes Peter Carson was wearing on the day in question?"

"Sure are," said Ham Grey.

"People's exhibit C," said Boken. He held the coveralls up before the jury. "Ladies and gentlemen, I call your attention to these stains on the knees."

The coveralls were clean, and the stains on the knees were obvious—great dark, smears, and the jury goggled at them in horror.

Boken turned toward Daniels. "If the defense wishes, we will offer proof that these stains are blood and were fresh stains on the day in question."

"Stipulated," said Daniels quietly.

Boken blinked and looked a little surprised. He handed the coveralls to the jury and said to Daniels, "No more questions. Your witness."

Daniels got up and nodded in a friendly way to Ham Grey.

Ham Grey nodded back and said: "Howdy."

"Howdy," Daniels answered. "Mr. Grey, have you known the defendant long?"

"Sure enough," said Ham Grey. "Known him ever since he wore three-cornered pants."

"Like him?" Daniels asked.

"Shucks, yes."

"Did you ever arrest him before the time in question?"

"Pete?" said Ham Grey, surprised. "I should say not. Why should I wanta arrest him for?"

"I'm sure I don't know," Daniels answered. "Did you know Dolly Hyde?"

"Yup," said Ham Grey. "Nice girl."

"Do you know her father and brother?"

"Yup."

"Have you ever arrested them?"

"Objection!" Boken said sharply. "There was no proper foundation for that question. The subject was not touched in the direct examination."

"Objection sustained," said Judge Pooley.

Daniels shrugged easily. "No more questions."

Ham Grey was dismissed from the witness stand, and the court adjourned for the noon recess.

CHAPTER XXI

THE COURT TAKES A REST

BOKEN had worked carefully, building his case bit by bit, one piece of cold, inescapable fact after the other, enclosing

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Pete Carson in a mesh from which no artifice could extricate him, and like many another better workman, he had saved his best and most dramatic piece until the last. He was ready to use it now.

At the beginning of the afternoon session he called Pappy Hyde. Pappy Hyde had prepared himself for the occasion. He was spruce and clean, and his scanty brown hair was slicked down over the bald spot on top of his head. He wore an ill-fitting blue suit that was obviously new, but there was nothing that could take the expression of wolfish, hard leanness out of his features or conceal the malevolent glitter in his dusty little eyes.

His two sons were present to back him up, sitting in the front row of the spectators' seats. Their faces had a bitterly savage likeness and they stared at Pete Carson and Daniels with unwavering scowls.

Pappy Hyde's given name, it appeared, was Ranse. He was sworn, and in answer to Boken's careful question, identified himself as the father of the victim.

"Do you know the defendant, Peter Carson?" Boken asked.

Pappy Hyde's lips curled away from his yellowish teeth. "I do."

"What was the occasion of your acquaintanceship with him?"

"He was tryin' to keep company with my daughter."

"And did you object to that?"

"Sure did," said Pappy Hyde bitterly.

"Why did you object?"

"Ain't havin' no dirty rat like that in my family."

"Was Pete Carson aware of your aversion to him?"

Pappy Hyde nodded violently. "You bet he was. I told him so myself. I told him to keep away from my daughter. So did my boys. We told him that we didn't want to catch him around our house no more."

"Tell us why you objected to his attentions to your daughter."

Pappy Hyde glared at Pete Carson. "He's been talkin' loose about her and spreadin' scandal. He ain't no good. He's a loafer and a bum, and always was. I didn't want her havin' no truck with him at all. I told her about him, and she promised me she wouldn't never see him no more."

"Do you know if she ever did see him after you had told her not to and she promised she wouldn't?" Boken asked.

"She seen him once," Pappy Hyde snarled. "When he killed her!"

Boken held up his hand quickly. "But other than that, Mr. Hyde?"

Pappy Hyde shrugged his thin shoulders. "Dolly was a good girl. She wouldn't do what her pa told her not to. She was kind-hearted, though, and she didn't want to hurt nobody's feelin's—not even his."

"How long before the date of her murder did you forbid her to see the defendant?"

"Couple months," said Pappy Hyde. "Couple months or maybe more."

"Did she feel badly when you told her?"

"Pretty bad," Pappy Hyde answered. "She was just a young girl, and she didn't know nothin' about such fellas as he is. When I told her she cried some, but she wouldn't do anything I told her not to. She understood I was only lookin' out for what was best for her."

"You said that you spoke to the defendant about the same matter. Did he exhibit any signs of anger over your decisions?"

"Huh!" said Pappy Hyde contemptuously. "Him? I should say not. He was scared to. He might come sneakin' around and try and soft-soap Dolly, but he was a-scared to talk to us."

"Did the defendant, to your positive knowledge, ever try to talk to your daughter after you had forbidden him to?"

"Yeah," said Pappy Hyde. "Two days before he killed her, I come home early, and I found him there a-talkin' to her. He was a-yellin' and talkin' mad to her, and she was cryin'. I chased him, but he seen me comin' too quick, and he got away from me."

"Did you exchange any words with the defendant at that time?"

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"Not nothin' but swear words," Pappy Hyde said. "He shook his fist and swore at me when he was runnin' away."

"Now, Mr. Hyde," said Boken, "let me summarize your testimony for the benefit of the jury. If I am incorrect in any matter, please correct me. You, as the father of Dolly Hyde, had certain objections to the attentions Peter Carson was paying your daughter. You so informed him and forbade him to attempt to see her. You also forbade your daughter to see him further.

"Your daughter was willing to abide by your wishes in the matter, but Peter Carson evidently was not. He tried to see your daughter subsequently, and when he was discovered he exhibited bitter anger and resentment against you. And further than that he exhibited anger against your daughter by abiding by your decision. Is that correct?"

"It sure is correct," Pappy Hyde said. "He was a-scared to come back at us, so he come back at her, and it wasn't none of her fault at all." Pappy Hyde got up out of the witness chair and extended a rigid, trembling arm straight at Pete Carson. "But you're gonna pay for it! You hear that? You're gonna pay!"

Pete Carson's face was white and twisted and scared, staring back at him.

JUDGE POOLEY banged his gavel for order, and two attendants hurried forward and seized Pappy Hyde and led him out the back door of the courtroom, still struggling vainly in their arms.

"The People rest!" said Boken in a loudly dramatic voice.

Judge Pooley said: "Mr. Daniels, if the defense wishes to question the witness, I will declare a recess until he has sufficiently recovered himself."

Daniels shook his head. "The defense has no questions, but since the defense did not anticipate that the prosecution would close its case so abruptly, we are not fully prepared at this moment. I would like to request an adjournment until tomorrow morning."

Pooley looked at Boken. "Mr. Boken?"

Boken shrugged elaborately. "The defense never will be prepared, but we have no objection to an adjournment."

"So ordered," said Pooley.

In the uproar that accompanied the closing of the court, Jonathan Smythe leaned close and murmured in Daniels' ear. "That put a large nail in the coffin. Why didn't you cross-examine him? A lot of that stuff was phoney as hell. You could have tripped him up."

Daniels shook his head. "No. Not that way."

"What are you going to do tomorrow?" Smythe asked.

"Put Pete on the stand and let him sink or swim by his own story."

"He'll sink," Jonathan Smythe said gloomily, "like a rock."

"Perhaps," Daniels admitted. "But it's the one thing we can do. And tomorrow I want you to have the two Hyde brothers and Pappy Hyde sitting in the front row of this courtroom."

"They'll be there," said Jonathan Smythe grimly. "They'll be there with bells on. I'll see to that little matter personally. What happens if they are?"

"I'm going to put on a little entertainment especially for their benefit," Daniels said.

CHAPTER XXII

FOLEY TAKES A LOOK

IT WAS not yet dusk when Daniels drove the old sedan up the steep slant of the driveway and parked it in front of the three-car garage, but the sun was close to the mountaintops and the blue haze lay close in the bottom of the valley, distorting all that it touched and giving it a queer, pleasant fuzziness. There was no stir of life from any of the other houses along the canyon. The silence was a strange, invisible weight over everything, and Daniels wondered at it vaguely as his feet crunched in the gravel of the drive.

He pushed back the gate in the wall

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and stared straight into Cora Sue's white, strained face. She was standing rigid in the center of the terrace, and when she saw Daniels she gave an audible gasp of relief.

"Oh, Jim!"

Daniels was tired and sick with the strain of the trial, and with the bitter, beaten feeling of failure, and the sight of Cora Sue there waiting for him was a refreshing thing that seemed to wash away the hard lump of discouragement in his throat. She was suddenly nearer and dearer to him than she had ever been before, and he took her in his arms and held her close.

Her voice came muffled a little against his shoulder.

"Jim, they're having some championship tennis matches today down at the club and all the others went down to see them. I guess everyone along the canyon went, but I wanted to stay and wait for you."

"Thank you for that, dear," Daniels said. He felt her tremble a little, pressed against him and he released her and pushed her back, his hands on her slim shoulders. "What's the matter?"

Cora Sue was trying to smile, but the smile twisted and quivered on her soft lips. "Jim. I'm—I'm afraid. I'm terribly afraid—I rode downtown with the others when they went and then walked back, and there's no one around anywhere. There's—no noise." She made a helpless little gesture. "I'm afraid, Jim—afraid . . ."

Daniels said comfortingly: "You shouldn't have waited here for me, dear. You got to thinking about Morris and what happened here last night, and naturally that's enough to make anyone afraid."

Cora Sue's voice was taut. "It isn't that. It's something else. It's something here right now. Jim, Annie and Bill aren't anywhere around. They didn't say they were going away, but when I came back I called and called and they didn't answer—"

"Probably went for a walk," Daniels said. "Come, let's go inside. You'll feel better in there."

"No!" said Cora Sue sharply.

Daniels stared at her puzzled. "But why not?"

"I don't know—there's—there's something in there—"

Daniels took her arm. "You come on. All this business has given you a bad attack of nerves, and I don't blame you a bit. We'll go in and play the radio or something, and then you'll feel much better."

She went with him reluctantly across the terrace and in through the big French windows. The low living-room was shadowed and dim and comfortable looking.

"You see?" said Daniels, smiling down comfortingly at her, "There's nothing in here—" His voice died in a little hiss of expelled breath.

"Nothing but me," said another voice, finishing his sentence.

THE man was standing in the doorway across the room. Standing quite still, with an alert tenseness. He was not large and he wore a dark blue suit and a dark hat with the brim pulled down low over his eyes. His face was pink, a queer light pink like rubber, and there were no lines in it at all. It looked like a mask only it was not a mask. But the thing that Daniels noticed was his eyes—sharp, beady and malevolent. No wonder they were so recognizable that Foley had been able to spot them, even in a photo.

"Raker!" said Daniels. "The man with the bandaged face!"

"Yes," said Raker. "Stand still, both of you."

He had a stubby revolver in his right hand, and he came closer to them now with quick cat-like strides, his eyes never wavering, never blinking.

"What do you want?" Daniels demanded.

"I'm going out of here," Raker said. "I'm taking your wife with me. Now get this. I've got it figured right. I'll hole up for one day with her. I won't hurt her a bit, if you do what I tell you. You get in touch with her old man and tell him to have the Feds pulled off the border,

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so I can get through. As soon as I get past that border, I'll let her go."

"You're a fool," said Daniels. "A. J. Bancroft can't call off the Federal men."

"He can," said Raker. "He's got a hundred million dollars, and anybody with that many millions can do anything. I tell you, it's the only way I can get out!"

His voice wavered some on the last word and Daniels knew that the man's nerves were tied up into a tight, jittering knot of fear, that he was half hysterical with strain, and that he was all the more dangerous because he was.

Daniels let go of Cora Sue's arm and shook his head slowly.

"It *will* work!" said Raker. "It had *better* work!"

"No," said Daniels. His voice sounded dull and thick in his own ears. "No. You're not taking Cora Sue."

Watching him, Raker raised his stubby revolver until the barrel pointed straight at Daniels' face.

"You're not going to take her," Daniels said in the same dull, desperate voice.

The hammer of the revolver clicked lightly.

"Jim!" Cora Sue said in a breathless gasp.

Daniels suddenly dove at Raker's legs, and he knew even as he did it that it was a foolish and futile thing to do. It was a thing that wouldn't work, that would never work, not with a man as desperate and as quick as Raker. It was a thing that only movie heroes could do successfully.

And then while he was still in the air, hurtling forward, there was a world-filling blast of sound that seemed to strike him and hurl him, flattened and breathless, against the floor. There was no pain, but there was a terrible lassitude that held him, and he couldn't move and couldn't think. Dimly far away he heard Cora Sue scream and then scream again.

He got up without ever remembering getting up or ever remembering how long he had been lying on the floor. The room was empty, and Daniels walked across it like a man in a dream. His feet were leaden clods and he could not lift them. They shuffled along the thick rug, raising little ridges ahead of them.

HE CAME to the front door. It was partially opened, and he went through it. He didn't remember the step down, just outside, and he fell on his face and gravel cut the palms of his hands. He got up again very slowly and laboriously and he saw Cora Sue and Raker going down the path toward the main road in the canyon. Raker had one hand clamped tightly over Cora Sue's mouth, and he was dragging her along beside him.

"Raker," said Daniels.

Raker whirled around, whirling Cora Sue with him, and looked back up the path. Daniels was coming, one step after the other, still dragging his leaden feet in the gravel.

"Raker," he said.

Raker had Cora Sue held in front of him like a shield, and he was pointing the stubby revolver over her shoulder. His voice was thin and high with fear:

"Get back there! Get back!"

Daniels plodded on toward him, wincing with the effort of each step. He saw the muzzle of the revolver quiver a little and then steady. He knew Raker was going to shoot in the next split-second and that he would not miss. He knew that he could never reach Raker, but he kept on, plodding, plodding . . .

There was a quick, flat burst of sound from the floor of the canyon. Just that one sound and no more, and then Raker stepped back away from Cora Sue. He raised his hand in a little fumbling gesture toward his temple, and then he turned and fell, sprawling full length on the path with his arm spread out in front of him.

Cora Sue seemed much closer to Daniels. He reached out one wavering arm and his fingers touched her shoulder. "Cora Sue!" he said, and then he knew he was falling and he couldn't stop.

. . . A little later he came wavering up out of the darkness of the mist, and

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he could see and think clearly for measured seconds. He was lying on his back. Cora Sue's face, all trembling and smeared with tears was close above his. There was another face, too. Mike Riley's face, with her eyes staring in wide, unbelieving awe.

"If I hadn't seen it—" Mike Riley was saying in a slow, incredulous wonder—"him walking right into that gun." Mike Riley was holding a gun herself. It was a long, slim .22 target pistol. "Lucky I kept this," she said absently. "I was going to pawn it, but it used to belong to my dad, and he taught me how to shoot with it, knocking tin cans off the corral fence. I had it in the car, and when I saw you and that man I ran down and got it—"

THE black curtain snapped down over Daniels' mind again. When he regained consciousness the second time, he was lying on the couch in the living room of Blair Wiles' house. Cora Sue's face was still there, white and anxious, and Mike Riley's, too. There was a third face—a man's face, grave and professional looking. The man's hands were working on the spot of fiery pain that centered high on Daniel's right shoulder. He was speaking to Cora Sue:

"That'll fix it. Not serious, Mrs. Daniels. Not serious at all. But it came damned close. The bullet hit him on the top of the shoulder and nicked a piece out of his collar bone. It didn't miss his spine very far. It must have been a terrific shock. I don't see how he ever got up and walked afterward."

"He walked, all right," said Mike Riley. "You should have seen him."

"Jim," said Cora Sue quickly, seeing his eyes open.

The mists were clearing away, and Daniels smiled up at her. "Is everything—all right?"

Cora Sue squeezed his hand. "All right, dear."

Daniels' eyes sought Mike Riley. "It was—you?"

Mike Riley nodded silently, embarrassed.

There was someone else pushing forward, and then Biggers' earnest perspiring face peered anxiously at Daniels.

"You all right, boy? Is he okay, doc?"

The doctor stood up. "Yes. No excitement, now. No moving around for awhile."

"It was Raker, all right," Biggers said, nodding eagerly to Daniels. "And him with a brand new face, too. He just got it in time to be buried with it. He's deader than a kippered herring. That bullet was only a .22, but you don't need any bigger one if you git it right in the temple." He glanced admiringly at Mike Riley. "That was some shooting, lady. Over fifty yards with a .22. I'd hate to try it."

"My dad spent a lot of time teaching me to shoot," Mike Riley said.

"He sure done a good job," said Biggers. He rubbed his hands, winking at Daniels. "We got things kinda tied up now, huh? There'll be a lot of newspaper boys down here pretty quick. Could you sort of give me the outline?"

Daniels' whole body felt heavy and weak and helpless, but his mind moved with a sharp, quick clarity. He said: "I can tell you a lot of it. I'm sure it's right, but you can check it up later.

"Morris had been hiding Raker, while Raker recovered from an operation Morris had performed on his face. Mrs. Gregory brought that $100,000 out here for Raker. That was his getaway money. But he didn't get it. Someone killed Mrs. Gregory and stole the money. Raker found her dead at the Phantom Lake Lodge that night, and he found that she had been stabbed with Morris' hunting knife.

"Later he found her money belt hidden some place that incriminated Morris further. Morris knew that Mrs. Gregory was going to bring that money to Raker, and naturally Raker thought that Morris had killed her and stolen the money. He put the money belt and the knife on Morris' bed then, to show Morris that he knew Morris was doublecrossing him. Actually Morris was not. He didn't know anything about the money or the murder.

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"But Raker was desperate and terror-stricken, crazy to get away from here. He knew he would be caught if he stayed. Morris couldn't persuade him that he didn't know anything about it, and the other night, when I interrupted them, and Morris tried to tackle Raker, Raker killed him."

Biggers looked blankly dismayed. "But—but that leaves us still in the hole."

"I know that," said Daniels. He was silent for a moment, thinking. "You know, the reason why this isn't all clear to us now is because there's a part of this pattern that is missing. There's a part that has never been in the pattern from the very first. That's why we can't see it. If we could only find that part . . ." He squinted absently at the ceiling. "There's one thing that has kept bothering me from the first. It keeps prodding and prodding at my mind, and there's no sense to it really but it's always there. Tell me, were there any witnesses to Blair Wiles' accident?"

Biggers nodded blankly. "Yeah. One."

"I'd like to talk to that witness just to get it out of my mind."

"Why, you *can't* talk to her."

"Why not."

"The witness is dead. She was Dolly Hyde."

DANIELS blew out his breath in a long sigh, and he was smiling. "That's it. That's the missing part of the pattern. I could feel all the time that there was some connection between Pete Carson's trial and this house. It was something deep and hidden, something underlying, and I was right!"

Cora Sue's voice was small and tight with horrified comprehension. "Jim—Jim—you don't think that Blair Wiles—"

"No," said Daniels. "No, of course not. It couldn't have been Blair Wiles. Don't you see? That's the answer."

"Oh," said Cora Sue. "I—I—I don't see, Jim. Who—who is the murderer?"

Daniels said slowly. "It's a man you never heard of, dear. A man named Randall. And now all I have to do is to prove it." He sighed lengthily. "But let that go for the moment. Mike Riley—I can't even begin to express my thanks for what you did for Cora Sue and me."

Mike Riley shrugged uneasily.

Daniels said: "It's none of my business of course, and you certainly did arrive at just the right time, but I can't understand why you didn't come down here sooner. I told you that Dak Hassan was down here or was coming down. I expected you to come a couple of days ago."

Mike Riley's voice was suddenly bitter. "I guess you might as well know now as later. I'm a liar."

"A liar?" Cora Sue repeated blankly.

Mike Riley nodded once. "Yes. The reason I didn't come down here sooner is because I didn't have any money. Dak Hassan borrowed the last fifty dollars I had. I had to sell my aeroplane—it's just an old box kite tied together with bailing wire—before I could get money enough to come down here."

"But—but—you told Dak Hassan—a million dollars—"

Mike Riley made an abrupt gesture. "I know I did. That's why I'm a liar. I was trying to make an impression on him. I thought a million dollars would. All I had in the world was that old aeroplane and an old broken-down cattle-ranch without any cattle on it.

"I do have a little credit through my father's friends, and Dak Hassan is so nice and sleek and polite—and he has that title—and I thought we could start a dude ranch for society people near Reno. I thought Dak Hassan, being in society himself, and being a prince, rich people would come there . . . And then—and then—Oh, hell! I love him, darn it!"

"Why I think that's a wonderful idea," Cora Sue said.

There was a sudden altercation at the door and as though he had timed his entrance to the split second, Dak Hassan burst into the room.

"My dear lady!" he said to Cora Sue.

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"My dear, dear lady! I have just heard of your horrible experience, and my heart bleeds—" He saw Mike Riley then, and for the first time since Daniels had known him, he lost his dapperly insolent air. "You!"

"Yes," said Daniels. "Meet your future wife!"

"Her?" said Dak Hassan. "Marry her? Me? Never!"

"Well." said Daniels, judicially. "Of course, you have an alternative. You can go to jail for petty theft, although I think serving a sentence for petty theft would be a little wearing both on your title and on your social position, if any."

"Petty theft?" Dak Hassan repeated. "What are you talking about?"

"You stole fifty dollars from Mike Riley."

"It's a lie!" Dak Hasson shouted.

Daniels moved his one good arm casually. "All right, if you want to be defiant, but I think I must warn you that the jury when they get an inkling of your reputation will be much more likely to believe Mike Riley's story than yours. But there is no use arguing. Better take him away, Biggers."

"With pleasure," said Biggers.

"Wait!" said Dak Hassan, quickly. "Wait, please! A Dak Hassan in jail for petty theft? The thing is preposterous! It's impossible!" He glanced inquiringly at Mike Riley. "My dear, beautiful girl. You wouldn't do this to me?"

"Oh, yes I would," answered Mike.

Dak Hassan gulped, took a deep breath and recovered his suavity. "Now, my dear girl—and you other people—consider this matter reasonably. The fifty dollars was a loan, and surely there is nothing criminal in a man's borrowing money from his"—here Dak Hassan had to pause and draw another deep breath, but he finally got the words out—"intended wife?"

Mike Riley gasped unbelievingly. All the other people in the room stared at Dak Hassan. He had the center of the floor again, and he smiled in his old courteously charming way.

"Of course! You see, Miss Riley is my future wife."

"It had better not be very far in the future," Daniels warned.

Dak Hassan made an airy gesture. "I shall attend to it at once—at once." He nodded at Daniels. "You have won, my friend, temporarily. But I have won, too. A million dollars is not so bad, eh?"

Mike Riley started to protest, but Daniels cut her off quickly. "A nice round sum to have," he agreed gravely.

"Come, my dear," Dak Hassan said, taking Mike Riley's arm.

"Oh—Dak Hassan," Daniels said. "I just wanted to tell you something. Did you notice the man lying dead on the path outside?"

"Yes," said Dak Hassan.

"Your future wife just shot him," Daniels said. "She is an excellent pistol shot. That would be a good thing for you to remember."

Dak Hassan's mouth opened a little. He glanced uneasily at Mike Riley. "Interesting," he said, in a subdued voice. "Very interesting. I shall remember it. Come, my dear."

THEY went out, with Mike Riley pausing in the doorway for a second to glance back with an expression of startled, unbelieving, frightened happiness on her face.

Cora Sue said uncertainly: "I don't know. I'm worried. She's so nice and she loves him so much and we owe her such a great deal and Dak Hassan is—is—"

Daniels chuckled weakly. "Something tells me that Mike Riley is pretty well capable of handling him. I have an idea that Dak Hassan is going to make a very good host for a dude ranch, whether he likes it or not."

"He ought to like it," Biggers said. "She's a swell-looking girl, although personally I would be a little leary of anybody who can shoot like she can. I'd hate to have her come after me with blood in her eye."

"Dak Hassan will be just smart enough

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to behave himself for that very reason," Daniels said. "I'll wager that's going to be an extremely happy marriage." He winked at Cora Sue. "And I've managed to get rid of one of my rivals."

"Huh?" said Biggers blankly. "Oh. Oh say, what's the idea about this Mrs. Gregory bringing money for Raker? What did she do that for?"

"I don't know," Daniels admitted. "We'll have to check on that. There must be some connection between Mrs. Gregory and Raker."

There was another altercation at the door, and Foley came strolling in. He was still wearing his woolly bathrobe, and he was so drunk that he teetered on his heels. "Hello, my good people," he said gravely. "Alarums and excursions—shooting, shouting and murder. Are you all alive?"

"More or less," Daniels said.

"How did you get in here?" Biggers demanded.

Foley waved a limp arm. "You forget, my fellow worker, that I am a deputy-sheriff. I am now investigating this interesting case, and, if I may say so myself, I have made a very vital discovery. I examined the face of our dead friend outside before the coroner took him away. He bears a remarkable resemblance to the former Mrs. Gregory."

"How can you tell?" Biggers demanded skeptically. "Doc Morris made his face all over."

Foley shrugged elaborately. "I don't mean the exterior features of his face. I mean the bony structure. The framework. It is noticeably similar."

Biggers scratched his head. "Charley Raker did have a sister. I've been looking into his case carefully. This sister dropped out of sight ten or fifteen years back when Raker took his first rap. She put up the dough to defend him that time. I've never heard of her since."

"That must be the answer," Daniels said. "Foley, you have a most remarkable ability to identify people. Just how does that come about?"

Foley was wavering back and forth dangerously. "Before I was elevated to my present position of prominence as a gag man, I used to be a cameraman. Cameramen don't just look at a person's face. They look at his features one by one. That's the way you can tell whether a face is photogenic or not. And also, incidentally, it's a very good way to identify a person if you only see one of his features. I think that I will go to sleep now." He suddenly let himself go and fell over backward on the floor with a sodden thump and began to snore instantly.

"Some guy," said Biggers in astonishment.

"As a guest," said Daniels, "he's very easy to entertain. And now I want to make some arrangements with you for tomorrow."

CHAPTER XXIII

THE SHERIFF TAKES HIS MAN

IT WAS Cora Sue who drove Daniels to San Benito the next day, following the path cleared by the county motorcycle police Biggers had assigned to them as an escort, and it was Cora Sue, aided by Jonathan Smythe, the motorcycle policeman, and two court attendants, who protected Daniels from the attentions of the thrill seeking crowd that seethed outside the courthouse.

Daniels was wearing a cast on his right shoulder that bulked hugely clumsy under his coat and shirt. His upper right arm was strapped close against his side, and his forearm was fastened across his chest. His face was pale and sick with pain. He had come over the protests and against the orders of his doctor. But he had come.

He had a driving eagerness to see this thing through, to win against the tremendous odds that were piled against him, and for the first time he believed that he had a chance to do that. If only, weakened and nauseated with pain as he was, he could summon the power and the force he needed.

The courtroom was packed solidly with spectators again, and this time Cora Sue

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sat at the defense counsel's table beside Daniels, watching him with anxious concern.

When the court was called to order, Boken arose and said with some reluctance, but with his eye on the reporters who were grouped at a table inside the railing next to the jury's box:

"Your honor, it has come to the attention of the People that the counsel for the defense, Mr. Daniels, was gravely wounded last evening in an effort to protect his wife from injury at the hands of a notorious criminal. If the defense wishes to interpose a request for an adjournment at this time, the prosecution has no objection."

Pooley looked at Daniels. "Mr. Daniels?"

Daniels shook his head slowly. "No. No, thank you. The defense is ready to proceed at this time, and as our first witness we wish to call the defendant himself, Peter Carson, to the stand."

Pete Carson had only the one suit, and it was wrinkled and soiled from its days of use in the court. His thin face was alternately white with panic and red with embarrassment as he took the oath. He couldn't control his voice. It squeaked once, and he brought it back to normal with a startled gulp. He looked very small sitting in the witness chair, bewildered and woebegone and scared. He watched Daniels with the same blind, unreasoning faith that a dog gives its master.

Daniels stood up.

He was still a little uncertain of his balance, and he had to steady himself against the defense table before he could walk across the room. He took his stand in front of the witness stand, leaning back against the railing that circled the jury box.

"Pete," he said, thoughtfully, "you know that you have been on trial for your life here in this courtroom. You know that I am the only means that you have had with which to defend yourself. I know that I have done and said a great many things that you haven't understood, a great many things that you have had to accept on pure blind faith in me, and yet you never protested or questioned me. Do you still trust me, Pete?"

"Yes, sir," said Pete, without any hesitation at all.

"Why?" Daniels asked seriously.

Pete wiggled uneasily in the witness chair. "Well—well—I don't know, Mr. Daniels. It's just the way you looked at me and talked to me that night up at Phantom Lake. I don't know . . ."

"Do you still think that I was right to have you surrendered to the authorities that night?" Daniels inquired.

"Yes, sir."

"Why, Pete?"

"Whatever you say for me to do is right, Mr. Daniels."

"Thank you," said Daniels. "Thank you, Pete. It was right in this particular case, at least. Now I'm going to prove it. Your honor, at this point I would like to request that the court order that no one is to leave the room for the next hour."

BOKEN spoke up. "Your honor, I am fully aware of the defense counsel's weakened physical condition, and I have no desire to further obstruct him, but I must object to this theatrical hocus-pocus."

"You have a reason for that request, Mr. Daniels?" Pooley asked, cautiously.

"A very good reason," said Daniels. "So vital a reason that I think if the request isn't complied with it will reflect very gravely upon this court." His voice was deadly serious, and there was no mistaking the fact that he meant exactly what he said.

Pooley blinked and then blinked again and finally nodded at the attendant at the door. "The court orders that no one is to leave this room for any reason for the next hour."

"Thank you," said Daniels. "And now there is one thing more I would like to ask before we start. Are Pappy Hyde and his two sons in this court?"

"You bet they are!" Jonathan Smythe

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answered emphatically. "Right there!"

Pappy and Lee and Jeff Hyde were sitting in the front row next to the aisle looking suddenly very uneasy and uncomfortable as the attention of the whole room was called to them.

"Thank you," said Daniels again. He turned back toward the witness chair. "Now, Pete, you were present here yesterday when Pappy Hyde testified. Was what he said at that time true?"

"Well—" Pete said uneasily.

"Answer me, Pete, was it true?"

"No, sir," said Pete, "not all of it wasn't."

"Is it true that you spoke scandalously of Dolly Hyde?"

"No!" said Pete emphatically.

"Is it true that you had any immoral intentions toward her?"

Pete's thin face twisted. "No. No, it ain't a bit true! We was gonna get married, just as soon as I could get enough money!"

Daniels nodded. "Pappy Hyde admitted that by implication during his testimony yesterday. He said that he didn't want you in the family. But that's beside the point. Why didn't he want you in the family, Pete?"

Pete started to squirm in the witness chair again. "Well—"

"Why?" said Daniels inexorably. "Tell me why, Pete."

"Well—well, I used to work in a gas station up on the Phantom Lake Road. That ain't so far from the Coldiron Canyon across country. Jeff and Lee and Pappy Hyde, they wanted me to give 'em a little gas."

"Give them gas?" Daniels repeated. "You mean they wanted you to sell them gas?"

"No," said Pete. "They wanted me to *give* it to 'em."

"Did you own the gas station, Pete?"

"No, sir."

"Well, then, if you gave them gas you would be giving them something that didn't belong to you, wouldn't you? You'd be giving them your employer's gas. You'd have to steal the gas, wouldn't you?"

"Yes, sir," said Pete miserably. "They said I could do it easy, and I guess I could have. There's always some shrinkage and spillage in a gas station, and with a big tank the boss wouldn't miss five or ten gallons, I guess. That's what the Hydes said, anyway. They said there wasn't no chance of me being caught—"

"But you wouldn't do it?"

"No, sir."

"You wouldn't steal for them?"

"No, sir."

"And that's why they got mad at you? That's why they disapproved of your going around with Dolly? Is that it?"

"Yes, sir. They said they wasn't going to have no gutless rabbit in their family."

"I see," said Daniels quietly. He turned around and looked at Boken. "Does the district attorney believe that the defense can't prove without a shadow of a doubt the truth of the testimony the defendant has just given?"

BOKEN'S square face was red as a beet under the stiff pompadour of his hair. He didn't say a word. Daniels turned a little more and faced the audience. "You —Pappy, Lee, and Jeff, stand up!"

The three of them stood up, the two sons tall and gangling and shamefaced beside their shrunken little father.

"Look at them," said Daniels, in the same even quiet tone. "Look at Lee and Jeff Hyde. There are the two men who did not want a brother-in-law who wouldn't steal for them. Look at Pappy Hyde. There is a man who wouldn't let his daughter marry a man who wasn't a thief. There's a man who sat on the stand yesterday and perjured himself, for all of you to hear." His voice suddenly snapped: "I demand here and now that a warrant be issued, and Pappy Hyde arrested for perjury!"

Boken stood up, his face still flushed. "Your honor, no one regrets this occurrence more than I do. I assure you that I had no knowledge that the testimony in question was so biased. I agree that

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the witness, Pappy Hyde, should be severely censured, but under the circumstances, speaking as he was of a man he believed guilty of his daughter's murder, I think it would be impossible for me to obtain a verdict of perjury."

Daniels was standing up straight now, his weakness forgotten, and his voice cracked like a whip: "You won't have to worry about that, Mr. Boken, because *you* won't prosecute them! Because *you* won't be the district attorney very much longer! By your stupid stumbling inefficiency you have allowed the completion of the most vicious murder plot of which I have heard! More than that you have *aided* in the plan!

"You sat here and prosecuted an innocent boy, as the murderer knew you would, because he knew what a fool you are! While the murderer himself ran at large and did his bloody deeds without the slightest hindrance from you! He might never have been apprehended except for the brilliant deductive work of your opponent and successor, Jonathan Smythe, sitting *there!*"

Daniels extended his good arm and pointed at Jonathan Smythe, who was staring back in wide-eyed consternation and surprise.

Daniels singled out Sheriff Grimes who was sitting back in a corner on the other side of the judge's dias. "And you, Sheriff! You also aided in this murder plot! You concealed it by running your department with such dimwitted inefficiency that the murderer could have gone on and killed off half the people in this county and you would have never suspected it!

"And he would *be* going on and on now, not even touched with the faintest shadow of suspicion, if it hadn't been for the efforts of the next incumbent of your office, your own deputy-sheriff, Biggers, who worked against your orders, who specifically disobeyed you! Because he did, he solved the murder."

Daniels' voice stopped, and there wasn't another sound in the court room. Slowly he turned around to look up at Judge Pooley. He didn't say anything, but he frowned in a speculative way.

The skin on Judge Pooley's face looked like unwashed canvas. He tried once, twice, and then finally managed a weakly uneasy smile.

Boken suddenly came to life. "I object!"

Pooley cleared his throat, still trying to hang on to his smile. "Mr. Daniels, if you would just go on with your questioning—"

"All right," said Daniels.

Pooley blew out his breath in a long gasp of relief. He looked like a man who had been granted a temporary reprieve from execution.

Daniels nodded at the Hydes. "You can sit down now. Don't try to leave this room."

THE three of them sank back awkwardly in their chairs, vainly trying to avoid the accusing glances of the spectators near them. "Now, Pete," said Daniels, "we'll proceed. Tell the jury just what happened on the day of Dolly's murder."

Pete's hands twisted together uneasily in his lap. "Well—I wanted to see her awful bad—awful bad. So, after work, I sneaked up to her cottage."

"Why?" Daniels asked. "Did you think she wanted to see you?"

"Why, sure," said Pete, surprised.

"Why didn't she come and see you then?" Daniels asked.

"She was afraid. Her brothers and her father, they give her a couple of beatin's for seein' me."

"Nice people, the Hydes," Daniels commented. "Tell me what else happened that day."

"Well, there ain't much else. I went up there and rapped on the back door and there wasn't no answer, and so I opened the door and looked inside and called. And then I seen her—I seen her lyin' there—"

"Yes?" said Daniels. "Yes, Pete?"

"Well—there was blood and I run in and grabbed her, and I seen she was dead—and—and I just went crazy—I couldn't think of nothin' but gettin' help for her—

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and I went out and run and run and run until I found Ham Grey—"

"Yes," said Daniels. "That, I think, accounts for all of the testimony that the district attorney has presented. But I want to ask you something else, Pete. I want you to think hard and try to remember now. Do you recall the day of April 2 just four years ago?"

"No, sir," said Pete blankly.

Daniels said: "I will refresh your memory. An accident occurred on that day—a very serious accident."

"Oh, yes. Sure. That was the day Blair Wiles had his accident. Dolly saw it happen."

"Yes, Pete," Daniels said. "Dolly saw it happen. Tell me more about what occurred that day."

"I was workin' in a garage then," Pete said. "A little garage and service station up near the top of Phantom Lake Road."

Daniels interposed a question. "Were you keeping company with Dolly Hyde at that time?"

"Oh, sure," Pete answered. "We been goin' together ever since we was in grade school. Why, on that very day she come up to bring me some cookies that she had baked. It was a pretty long walk for her, but she liked to walk, and it was a nice day. But she dropped the cookies somewhere. She come runnin' into the garage all hysterical and wanted me to call an ambulance. She said that she had seen Blair Wiles drive off a cliff down the road a ways."

"Did she know Blair Wiles by sight?" Daniels asked. "Well enough to recognize him, I mean?"

"Oh, sure," said Pete. "Everybody knew Mr. Wiles. He had a great big red car, and he was always drivin' fast in it."

"What did Dolly tell you about the accident?"

Pete squinted his eyes, trying to remember. "Well—she was all mixed up and hysterical. She said that she saw Blair Wiles and that stooge of his, go past her real fast in his red car. Blair Wiles was driving. She said that right ahead of her they went off the road and down into a canyon. It was a deep canyon, and she could hear the car crashin' and bangin' all the way down. She was scared stiff, but she run forward and looked down over the edge of the road. She could see the car down there burnin' like everything."

"Go on," requested Daniels. "What else did she say?"

Pete shrugged. "Well, she was all mixed up about it. She said one of 'em was flung free of the car, and that he was crawlin' around and rollin' on the ground and yellin' and that his clothes was all on fire. She said that one was the chauffeur, but of course she was all hysterical and mixed up and got it wrong."

"No, Pete," Daniels said gently. "She didn't get it wrong. She got it right, and because she got it right she was murdered." He turned back toward Judge Pooley. "Your honor, as you will note, it lacks five minutes of being an hour since the time I requested you to order no one to leave the courtroom. I did that because I mean here and now to expose the murderer. He is not in this courtroom, but I did not want to take the chance of anyone getting out and warning him. In exactly five minutes he will come through that door." Daniels pointed toward the front door of the courtroom.

THE tension in the room mounted until it was a crackling, invisible force that pressed down palpably on the brain of every person present.

Daniels stood perfectly still, waiting. There was a long, breathless eternity of suspense. The minute hand crept forward with sly, infinitesimal hesitation, and then it touched the numeral on the dial and covered it. In that second the courtroom doors swung open and the mutter and babble of the crowd outside sounded plainly.

Blair Wiles' wheelchair was pushed into the room, and in it Blair Wiles was a lumpy, blanket-wrapped bundle. His horribly scarred face was dark with blood,

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and his eye stared with redly distended rage. Biggers was pushing the wheelchair, and over Blair Wiles' grotesque face his own square, commonplace one looked awed and uneasy.

Daniels walked to the gate in the railing and pointed straight down the aisle. "There is the murderer!"

For a moment or two the silence held, breathless and enormous. The wheelchair continued to come on noiselessly; then suddenly it stopped, and that seemed to break the stunned pause.

Boken jumped up incoherent with rage. "Outrage! I protest! I won't stand for this—"

Daniels' voice rode his down. "He is a murderer, and you took money from him for your campaign expenses and so did Sheriff Grimes! Sit down and think up an excuse for that! You'll need it!"

But Boken remained on his feet there. His lips were working, but he could not find words; he could only stare now, his face gone white.

Blair Wiles' voice came thick and choked and low: "You're mad. You're mad, Daniels, but mad or not you'll pay for this! I'll hound you out of the country!"

Pooley finally got up enough courage to speak: "Mr. Daniels, surely you're not suggesting that Blair Wiles—why—why what reason, what possible reason could he have . . ."

Daniels said: "Blair Wiles *could* have no reason. Blair Wiles is not guilty of murder. That man is not Blair Wiles. That is Randall, Blair Wiles' ex-chauffeur and bodyguard."

Suddenly his voice rose to an impassioned shout, relentless and logical and unanswerable. "Yes, that man is an imposter! And how ridiculously easy it was for him! Think of it for a second! He didn't have to *look* like the old Blair Wiles, he didn't have to *talk* like the old Blair Wiles, he didn't have to *write* like the old Blair Wiles, he didn't have to *act* like the old Blair Wiles! No! Everyone *expected* him to be different. He had gone through a horrible accident that had supposedly altered him completely!

"Dolly Hyde was right. Randall was thrown clear of the car. He was horribly injured, and his clothes were burned off him. Blair Wiles died in the car, but at the time they were picked up both were so terribly mangled that no one knew which was which. Then Randall was taken to the hospital, and Dr. Morris treated him. Dr. Morris found out that he was Randall, and the idea of the substitution of Randall for Blair Wiles was Dr. Morris' idea.

"Dr. Morris was a crook. Here was a marvelous chance to make more money than any crook had ever thought of making before. Dr. Morris took it. He persuaded Randall to accept the identity of Blair Wiles. I admit that freely.

"Dr. Morris was the moving force in this thing at the first. It must have been that way. Randall was too seriously injured to have thought up and carried through a plan of this kind. And Dr. Morris continued to be the moving force in the plot and everything went through without the slightest suggestion of a hitch. Randall was accepted by everyone as Blair Wiles—a shadowy, twisted, burned and grotesque Blair Wiles, but nevertheless the real Blair Wiles.

"BUT as time went on, Blair Wiles began to resent his own subordinate position in the plot. Perhaps nothing would have come of that if it had not been for Charles Raker. Now Dr. Morris was, and had been, a crook. He had served criminals before, and once you have gone through that, it is not so easy to drop all contact with your former clients.

"Raker came to Morris and wanted a facial operation, and Morris had to perform it and had to hide him while he was doing so because of the knowledge Raker had about him. That started the whole train of events. Randall liked his position as Blair Wiles and he had no intention of relinquishing it. He knew that Dr. Morris' attention to his criminal clients would,

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sooner or later, bring a lot of unwelcome attention to both Dr. Morris and Randall. He wanted to make his own position secure.

"The first move was the murder of Dolly Hyde. She was the only witness to the accident. Randall went to talk to her. He had planned it very carefully. Being a cripple and being unable to stand except with the greatest effort, he, of course, sat down. He sat down at the table which Dolly Hyde was setting in the Hyde kitchen. He knew about the Hydes and Pete Carson. He had egged the Hydes on in their treatment of Pete Carson.

"He went to Dolly Hyde as Blair Wiles, as a friend, to talk to her about Pete. That is the criminal, vicious, ruthless part of this. He went as a friend that she trusted, offering to help her and Pete. He brought the conversation around to the accident, and he found that she *did* know that it was Randall and not Wiles who had been thrown clear of the car. She had attached no importance to that fact and neither had anyone else. It was thought that she was just hysterical, and the inquiry into the accident was very casual.

"But Randall could take no chances on someone investigating further and believing Dolly Hyde. He murdered her there in the Hyde kitchen, and he left the way he had come, sneaking through the woods up the canyon, fighting his way through the underbrush with his cane, keeping out of sight of Henrietta Parkins.

"Then Pete Carson came as Randall knew he would come and was blamed for the murder as Randall planned that he should be blamed. And because the district attorney was stupid and subservient to the name of Blair Wiles, he aided the murderer in his plan. And because the sheriff was anxious for more campaign contributions from Blair Wiles, he made no effort to really investigate the murder. So that part of the plot went off exactly as it was planned. And then it was time for the next step.

Mrs. Gregory was Raker's sister. He needed money, a great deal of money, to get himself out of the country safely and to stay under cover when he got out. She brought him that money. Morris knew about it, and he told Randall. Randall killed Mrs. Gregory, and he arranged that murder so it would appear to Raker that Morris had done it.

"He stabbed Mrs. Gregory with Morris' hunting knife, and later he hid the money belt Mrs. Gregory wore in Morris' possession where Raker would find it. Raker *did* think Morris had double-crossed him, and, as a result, he killed Morris just as Randall had planned that he would. And then Raker himself was killed trying to escape, as Randall was sure that he would be. He knew that Raker would never surrender. There was no use in him surrendering. He would have been hung if he had. There then, is the whole pattern completed, and there was no one alive who knew that Randall was Blair Wiles!"

BLAIR WILES twisted under his blanket like a swollen, venomous spider. One scarred hand came free, and it was holding a heavy cane. He turned and swung the cane at Biggers' face, and the swish of it going through the air was plainly audible.

Biggers jumped back, ducking, as the cane, unimpeded, struck down across the heavily braced back of the wheel chair and splintered in its center.

Daniels said, "That cane, Randall, isn't quite as strong as the one you murdered Dolly Hyde with."

Randall turned toward him. He clawed his way free of the blankets. He got up and tried to walk toward Daniels. His face was a distorted, writhing smear, and saliva bubbled on his scarred lips. He started falling forward, and the splintered cane was no support.

He sprawled full length in the aisle and all the time his one reddened, distended eye was fixed implacably on Daniels, and he was making thick, mouthing, animal-like sounds in his throat.

For a split second he was there alone

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on the carpet, clawing like a crippled, enormous bug. Then Biggers and two of the court attendants hurled themselves upon him and merged with him into a scrambling fighting tangle out of which the slobbering, mad animal sounds rose and rose to a crescendo and then died out in choking gasps.

The frantic struggles were stilled now; the quick, harsh breathing of the captors was unnaturally loud, for there was no other sound in the courtroom.

Daniels turned around to face the jury. "Ladies and gentlemen, the defense rests its case."

As if his words were the signal, the room broke into a frenzied uproar, with people scrambling and pushing and fighting for the aisle.

In that first moment, the exhaustion that Daniels had fought off for so long claimed him suddenly. He looked out at the courtroom uproar through a kind of haze; he was aware that his legs were trembling a little. Then he felt a hand supporting him.

Cora Sue was close to Daniels, holding tight to his good arm, and smiling up into his face with an expression that was both proud and worried. Very quickly she led him out through the rear door into the back hall of the courtroom. It was quiet here, suddenly and strangely quiet. Empty because all the loungers had left to participate in the excitement at the front of the court.

Daniels and Cora Sue walked down the hall together and Daniels said, smiling weakly down at her: "I'm not going to give you any more arguments, dear. I *do* need a vacation now."

"Oh, no," said Cora Sue. "No more vacation for you. You're going right home and rest up from the rest you've just had." She steered him firmly down the hall toward the door.

THE END

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Argonotes.

The Readers' Viewpoint

WE HAVE about decided that what we lack is cosmic consciousness. Space leaves us cold, and we have no more desire to ferret out the secrets of energy and matter that we have to rummage through a bureau-drawerful of somebody else's old love letters.

We give you an example.

Take, for instance, the symbol of the perisphere and trylon—which, incidentally, is becoming increasingly difficult for residents of this snug little island not to take. Supposedly representative of infinity and progress—and we hope we have got at least that much straight—they fail utterly to goad us to super-earthly thoughts. They are merely a huge ball and something vaguely reminiscent of a grossly exaggerated billiard cue to us. And it takes a lot more than *that* to send this department scurrying on any imaginary scalings of the stratosphere.

Our small and possibly over-ballasted soul cringes rather than zooms when confused with trillions of light-years, or when asked to ponder the endless array of glittering pinpoints that make up a galaxy.

It will respond instantly to the sound of a hurdy-gurdy rumbling out last year's hit parade or to the goodly smell of a crackling wood-fire. It will do handsprings at the pleasure of reading a well-turned sentence or at the sight of, say, Myrna Loy. But even when brought face to face with matters astronomical, chemical, interspacial and the like, it merely goes and hides under the bed until the storm is over.

Possibly this has resulted in what some of our reader-experts consider a cavalier attitude toward such things, on the pages of this magazine. Certainly it causes us to lean heavily on the intelligence and accuracy of the men who write for us about them. As they have slipped, so—we are afraid—have we. . . .

Apparently one reader is convinced that we were unfair to Astronomy. Certainly we didn't mean to be; we admire the science greatly, if from a distance. And so our sincere apologies to Astronomy and to

R. L. MORRIS

I am writing this letter to tell you how much I enjoy reading ARGOSY. I consider it to be one of the best weekly magazines on the market, owing to the fact it has more variety in its stories.

One of the finest yarns I have read for a long time was A. Merritt's "Ship of Ishtar". It was unusual in its theme and a type of story I like very much. Also may I mention the Captain Hornblower sagas. We don't often have yarns of high adventure like them.

I do not like any of the phantasies of Edgar Rice Burroughs. Personally I think the man ought to be in a psychopathic ward, for his stories in my opinion are pure tripe. If there are any human being on Mars, be sure they are of a finer type than Burroughs pictures them. I firmly believe there is a much more brainy human on Mars than there is on Earth, and the reason they haven't got in touch with us through radio is due primarily to the Heaviside Layer which will not permit ordinary wave lengths to penetrate. Or else, which is more than likely, they consider us inferior forms of life, and I don't blame them.

I am looking forward very much to "The Axe Bites Deep" by Philip Ketchum, and more particularly "Non Stop to Mars" by Jack Williamson, as he is an old favourite of mine.

In parenthesis, I don't like your remarks anent astronomy which you made some time ago when some of your readers were making disparaging remarks about that fatuous story

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"Three Against the Stars." Believe me, sir, Astronomy is the greatest of all sciences, and by it we find the only Bible that points the way to the Omnipotent.

THETFORD MINES, CANADA.

OUR next critic treats of such elementary matters as normal atmospheric pressure, specific gravity, and Greenwich fractional time. We, personally, think he is mistaken in his contention that because Mr. Ernst's Martian—in his story "The Man Next Door"—was not affected by the Earth's cold, he suffered unpleasantly from our atmospheric pressure.

JsA

Compliments are due you for publishing the splendid little fantasy by Paul Ernst in the March 4th issue. But being a rabid science-fiction fan (as evidenced by the green typewriter ribbon, etc.) I of course am affected with a chronic case of fault-finding.

To wit: If the alien entity who had taken possession of August Herrin's body was not affected by the cold weather, and other earthly evils, why should the normal atmospheric pressure to which the body was accustomed, affect it? . . . the body, I mean. For instance, on page 66, first column, Herrin-Carpenter says, "I tire easily . . . simply the weight of the atmosphere. . . ." I realize that this was practically the only way that Mr. Ernst had of showing that his character was "different", but I do think he could have been a little more consistent.

On the whole, however, the story was above the average run of the fantasy fare of late. And speaking of that, I'm glad beyond words to see you slowly returning to our old policy of a fantasy-a-week.

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28x5.00-20	2.15	1.25			
6.00-17	2.60	1.45			
6.00-18	2.60	1.45			
29x5.25-19	2.60	1.45			
30x5.25-20	2.60	1.45			
31x5.25-21	2.60	1.45			
6.00-17	2.60	1.45			
29x5.50-19	2.60	1.45			
30x5.50-20	2.60	1.45			
6.00-17	2.60	1.45			
29x5.50-19	2.60	1.45			
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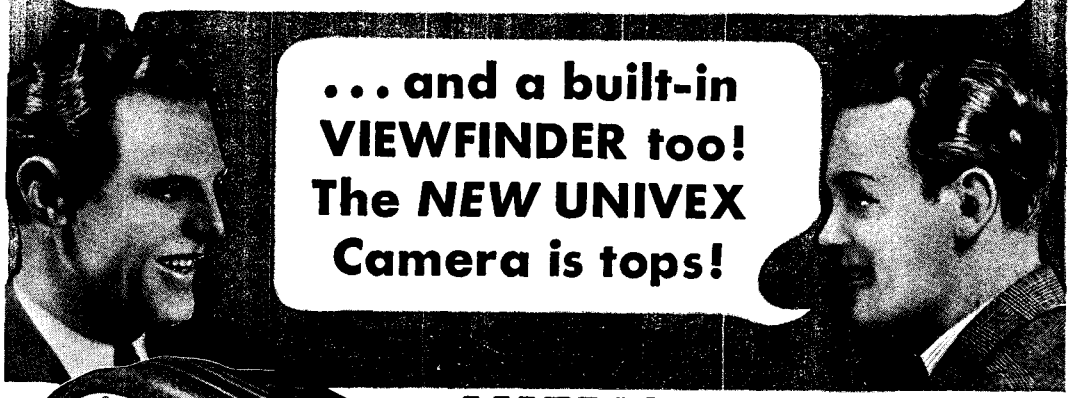

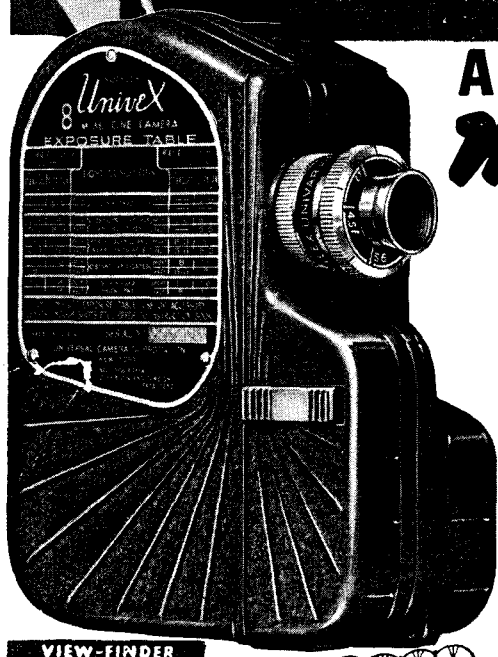

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